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## Beyond the Factory Floor: The experiences of displaced manufacturing workers as they retrain in community college settings

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**Beyond the factory floor: The experiences of displaced manufacturing  
workers as they retrain in community college settings**

by

**Mary J. Entz**

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

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Ames, Iowa

2010

## DEDICATION

To

my first

and best teachers,

my mom and dad,

Patty and Joe Entz.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study describes and examines the experiences of displaced manufacturing workers as they lose jobs and retrain in community college settings. The analysis included perceptions of community college services and programming designed to help the workers transition into retraining programs, along with those factors that they identified as contributing to or inhibiting success. Given the recent, permanent structural shifts in the U.S. economy, which have decimated the manufacturing sector and will continue to do so, learning more about the experiences of displaced workers will better prepare community colleges to serve this population more effectively.

This qualitative, phenomenological study was prompted by the closure of a large manufacturing plant in a rural mid-western area. Six participants took part through a series of interviews. Mezirow's theory of transformational learning was used as a guide by which the perspectives of the participants could be viewed. Five themes emerged through the research: (a) absence of support to pursue post-secondary education; (b) fear of failure; (c) development of coping strategies; (d) critical relationships; and (e) perceptions of self-change/transformation. The findings will provide community college administrators, faculty, and staff with new information to update practices in several areas that displaced manufacturing workers may use over the course of their retraining: student services, financial aid services, counseling and advising, general support services, or in the classroom.

## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

While the U.S. economy has gone through a number of cycles of boom and bust over the past century, each causing cyclical unemployment, it is now clear that, as a whole, the economy is experiencing permanent structural shifts. As companies downsize, restructure, or relocate, manufacturing jobs in the U.S. have been, and will continue to be, especially hard hit (Carroll, Blatner, Alt, Schuster, & Findley, 2000). Between 2001 and 2003, an estimated 2 million manufacturing jobs were lost (*National Review*, 2003, p.1). More recently, a Bureau of Labor Statistics survey reported that approximately 15,904,000 individuals were employed in manufacturing jobs in 2008. By 2009, that number had dropped to 12,152,000, a decline of 24% in a single year (Moore, Gennett, Manning, & Roberts, 2009). Furthermore, most of these jobs will not be returning to the U.S. This permanent structural change has given rise to the term “displaced worker.” Displaced workers have lost their jobs through no fault of their own, and, more importantly, have “a very small likelihood of being recalled to their old jobs” (Jacobson, LaLonde & Sullivan, 2005a, p. 48). Displaced workers may find themselves possessing skill sets that are no longer desired in the local economy, making it almost impossible to regain employment in the same field in which they previously worked. Displaced workers, therefore, are distinct from unemployed workers in that “the temporary earnings losses associated with unemployment constitute only a small portion of the income losses associated with their layoffs” (p. 47). Additionally, displaced workers may suffer earnings losses that continue for the long-term, or even permanently (Ryberg, 2007). Not only are

they “unlikely to find a job that pays the same as the job they lost” (Eberts, 2005, p. 76), but also, if they seek new work, it is very likely that they will need to be retrained, with all of the costs associated with that process.

Research has indicated that the ability of displaced workers to recoup their former income is declining, with only 48% of those workers “earning as much or more in their new jobs as they had earned on the job they lost” (*National Review*, 2003, p. 1). Even if they choose to retrain, displaced workers may find that the kinds of job skills required in the information-based economy bring with them high, perhaps prohibitive learning curves, and new skills will have to be continually replenished in an ever-changing economy (Sullivan, 2007). Along with the demands of change, displaced workers may suffer from depression, anxiety and a sense of loss which further complicate the post-displacement period (Gallo, Bradley, Dubin, Jones, Falba, Hsun-Mei, et al., 2006; Hironimus-Wendt & Spannaus, 2007; Latack, Kinicki & Prussia, 1995; Legerski, Cornwall, & O’Neil, 2006; McKey-Ryan, Song, & Kinicki, 2005). Finally, the imperative to get these displaced workers back into the workforce only grows as the imbalance continues to widen between workers leaving the workforce and those entering (Shugart, 2006). All of these factors combine to make the prospect of finding new work through retraining a daunting but important challenge for displaced workers personally and society in general.

Community colleges have embraced the opportunity to retrain the workforce in their regions, and are heavily involved in retraining displaced workers in all industries, for all fields (Hupp, 2009). Although information and measures have been gathered on the effectiveness of *outcomes* for this retraining (salary information,



attrition and graduation rates, etc.), there is little research that asks the displaced worker directly for feedback on his or her experiences while transitioning into and through such community college offerings.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Community colleges have long been involved in workforce retraining. Since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, community colleges have served as vocational schools and provided training programs during times of widespread unemployment, thus helping workers get back into the labor force (Kapper, 2002). Community colleges have also worked with recipients of the Trade Adjustment Act retraining displaced workers with the hope of getting them back to work in the local economy within two years (Simmers, 2003, p. 1). According to Therrian (1993), “community colleges have emerged as the largest provider of work-force retraining, aside from employers themselves” (p. 76).

Given the deep workforce shortages predicted, due to the anticipated retirement of the baby boom generation and the decline of high school graduates, the imperative to return displaced workers to the workforce is critical. The potential result of this imbalance is the exodus of a well-educated workforce and an insufficient supply of prepared workers. Shugart maintained that “...an ample supply of well-educated workers will trump almost every other variable in the attraction of new, high-value jobs...” (2006, p. 20). For economies to sustain themselves, a well-educated, well-trained, sufficient workforce is essential, and every displaced worker will be needed.

Questions have been raised about the effectiveness of community college-based displaced worker retraining (Holstein, 2009). A study by Addy and Ritchie (2003) noted that the purpose and goals of displaced worker retraining in community colleges may be as “far apart as planets in the solar system” when compared with the interests and needs of local industries (p. 22). Other studies have found that the premises behind many community-college based retraining programs may be faulty. It is not always true that a worker may train in a new industry and remain in the local economy, simply because the jobs are not there. The idea that the same field will be able to absorb the newly displaced workers may amount to wishful thinking (Helwig, 2004). The fact that it is notoriously difficult for a displaced worker to ever work again at a wage level enjoyed in the preexisting job raises the question of the cost benefits of retraining.

While studies have documented the above factors, few have addressed displaced workers directly regarding their experiences of transitioning into a community college for the purpose of retraining. Given the oft-cited high attrition rates and low completions rates in retraining programs, the difficulties of matching training to workforce needs, post-displacement salary differentials, and the current workforce capacity issues, it is important for community colleges to be well-prepared to best meet the needs of the displaced worker retraining on their campuses.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The primary purpose of this study was to develop a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of displaced manufacturing workers as they lose

jobs and retrain in a community college setting. This information may help community colleges better tailor programming to meet the needs of displaced workers. The decisions displaced workers make when faced with job loss and subsequent retraining were examined by considering context, personal belief systems and life experiences according to adult learning theory. More specifically, this study examined the experiences of displaced manufacturing workers through Mezirow's transformative learning theory. This theory involves "the process of making new or revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 1). It is hoped that this approach to adult learning will help to inform the design and delivery of community college-based displaced worker retraining programs.

At present, too many programs are criticized for failing to take into consideration the overall impact of worker displacement. Researchers have argued that "...two-year colleges have failed to provide enough short-term training programs, do not know (enough about) which jobs to train dislocated workers for, and are allocated funds from the state in a way that makes it difficult for them to do more" (Evelyn, 2003, p. A20). Moreover, community college officials often complain that the terms of federal funding or programs are not in tune with displaced workers real needs, and that, as a result, many teachers in the programs do not understand the challenges the workers face, both emotionally and in terms of learning new skills (Evelyn, 2003, p. A31). Overall, community colleges need to "develop a better understanding of the range of attributes" of different workers, so that that they may better understand the decisions displaced workers face when adapting to their loss

and deciding to retrain (Carroll et al., 2000, p. 110). Some workers recover from displacement quickly, and move on, but others take much longer to recover, and often end up patching together a new life with a series of part-time jobs (Daniels, Gobeli, & Finley, 2000, p. 140). Some workers adjust while others do not; some accept that they will have to move on to another field whereas others cling to the field in which they formerly worked. Each of these variables must be better understood in order to design programming that truly serves the needs of displaced workers.

Job loss, and especially displacement from work through no fault of one's own, is a highly traumatic event that negatively impacts the worker in many ways. It may lead to depression, anxiety, hopelessness, and a permanent sense of loss that is slow to heal. According to career theory (Daniels et al., 2000, p. 138), a job is not just a job but rather a way of life, and often the foundation of a person's identity. Thus, losing a job means "losing a way of life, a way of thinking about one's self, and one's place in the world" (p. 138). Community colleges that serve displaced workers are faced with the emotional fallout resulting from displacement, including the sometimes counterproductive and even irrational responses to retraining that may cause workers to balk at retraining opportunities. It is hoped that through a better understanding of the emotional needs of displaced workers, high attrition rates and fears associated with the prospect of retraining may be mitigated, improving the overall outcomes for displaced workers retraining in a community college setting.

Retraining efforts framed according to adult learning theory may be better able to respond to the needs of adult learners, and improve the likelihood that they

will stay in the program and finish the retraining. Efforts that utilize adult learning theory may help to develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills in workers so, "... that they will not only be better able to take on more highly skilled tasks, but be able to think about them in such a way as to make them more likely to evolve with change in the future" (Daniels et al., 2000, p. 139).

### **Theoretical Perspective**

Adult learning theory has been utilized in a number of different curricula and student services in community colleges. A basic premise of adult learning theory is that mature learners are more self-directed, find learning more intrinsically joyful, and then are more committed to classroom work (Carlan, 2001, p. 2). These principles are based on the theory of andragogy developed by Malcolm Knowles (2005).

Carlan (2001) noted that most adult learners enter community college or adult education "for a specific purpose, and possess a sense of urgency in the pursuit of those objectives" (p. 10). It is also true, however, that adult learners are more burdened with the demands of real life and, as mentioned previously, their persistence to graduation or completion is lower. Adults also feel a great deal of anxiety about returning to college and, thus, it is necessary to pace learning so that they will not become overwhelmed. This latter point suggests that adults like to move slowly through material. Therefore, on a basic level, it may be that displaced worker retraining programs suffer high attrition rates and low completion rates because

programming has not been designed to meet the needs and demands of adult students.

Adult learning theory works to counter the notion that adults have built their working life on basic taken-for-granted and unexamined assumptions that they accept uncritically. As a result, it is perceived that adults might be especially difficult to re-educate. They have become, according to this sometimes stereotyped notion, set in their ways. However, Mezirow (as cited in Brown, 2005) argued that true adult learning occurs precisely when adults are coaxed to reexamine the unexamined assumptions of their lives and develop a new “meaning perspective” which will enable them to move on to new and better things. Mezirow’s concept of transformative learning may provide an effective model to help displaced workers, especially those overcome with the passivity and resignation resulting from displacement trauma, gain sufficient insight to see the necessity of moving on and being retrained. For this reason, such an approach to working with displaced workers pushes community college personnel to meet the “obligation to help learners to understand the alternatives and practical consequences of their actions” (Brown, 2005, p. 6). Community colleges are well-suited to attend to displaced workers because of their long history of dedication to the idea of lifelong learning. They have historically emphasized in all curricula (and services) the development of the person as an adult learner (Armitage, 2004).

### **Significance of the Study**

Recent studies of displaced workers have primarily considered the cost-benefit ratio of training dislocated workers from three standpoints: financial, attrition and graduation rates, and workforce capacity. Displaced worker *attitudes* about their situation, their future prospects, the method by which they will pursue their future, and their attitudes about retraining in a community college setting have only been cursorily studied, and are in need of greater detail and investigation. Therefore, this study will provide information to community colleges working with displaced workers in the hope that hearing the voices of the workers may positively impact programming.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions guided this study:

1. How do displaced manufacturing workers describe the services and programming available to them as they are displaced and then transition into retraining programs in a community college setting?
2. How do displaced workers describe those aspects of their experiences that they have identified as contributing to their success in retraining programs in a community college setting?
3. How do displaced workers describe those aspects of their experiences that they have identified as inhibiting their success in retraining programs in a community college setting?

### **Definition of Terms**

The following terms were defined for use in this study:

*Adult learning theory (andragogy):* A learning theory developed by Knowles (2005) which purports that adult learners desire relevant, problem-solving learning geared towards solving immediate real-life problems, delivered in a discussion format, attentive to their preexisting skills and interests.

*Displaced workers:* Persons who lose their jobs through no fault of their own, usually through corporate decisions connected to moving the workforce overseas and ending operations in the U.S. Displaced workers are distinguished from merely unemployed workers in that their jobs have disappeared, the likelihood of their returning to their field of work is small, their unemployment spell is likely to be longer in duration, and the loss of earning power is possibly permanent.

*NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement):* A 1994 agreement by the United States, Canada, and Mexico that instituted a schedule for the phasing out of tariffs and eliminated a variety of other fees and hindrances to encourage free trade among the three North American countries.

*TAA (Trade Adjustment Assistance):* Originally established in 1974 and later amended as TAA, this act provides a variety of reemployment services and benefits to workers who have lost their jobs or suffered a reduction of hours and wages as a result of increased imports or shifts in production outside the United States.



## **Summary**

Changes in the U.S. economy have produced a new type of unemployed worker, the permanently displaced worker. These workers not only have little or no hope of seeing their jobs return, but they may also witness the disappearance of their field or industry from American life. High attrition rates and low completion rates in many displaced worker retraining programs at community colleges indicate that something may be lacking in current programming. Few studies have asked displaced workers directly for feedback regarding their retraining programming. This study examined the views of a sample population of displaced workers in a single locality to ascertain the broader scope of the displacement experience and thought regarding retraining. The study may contribute to the literature on the emotional dimension of the displacement experience to enable community colleges to better tailor their programming to meet the needs of displaced workers.

## **CHAPTER 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

While existing research on the factors that surround displacement abounds, little has been written from the experiential perspective of those who go through the process of displacement and retraining. Furthermore, research exists that chronicles the depression of job loss and the anxiety that non-traditional students may feel upon retraining, but few studies have committed to best practices for those serving displaced workers as they retrain, primarily in community colleges. The literature review begins with a brief history of the changes in our economy that have given rise to the displaced worker. Then a brief background on governmental programs that support retraining efforts is presented. Since the majority of displaced workers retrain in community college settings, the next section discusses the role of such institutions in retraining efforts. This is followed by a closer look at the impact of retraining programs on individuals by examining job loss and mental health, the challenges of retraining through the lens of adult learning theory, and the eventual impact of retraining.

### **Displaced or Dislocated Workers**

The U.S. economy has experienced numerous cycles of boom and bust. Generally, in the context of those more or less predictable cycles, the government has developed policies to aid workers during “hard times.” Workers, themselves, have also developed a number of coping strategies to wait out the “bad times.” However, the “good times” have inevitably returned, so the majority of the programs

were focused on short-term or stopgap measures. Operating on the assumption that a laid-off worker would be reemployed shortly, government assistance has historically taken a “passive” form of unemployment insurance. In the context of this program, the laid-off worker receives compensation while he or she simply waits out the bad cycle, or the gap between losing one’s job and finding another.

Today, however, it has become increasingly clear that the U.S. economy is experiencing permanent, structural shifts. Forces of globalization encourage employers to outsource or relocate offshore for cheaper labor. Technological advancements have rendered many jobs as redundant. In addition, numerous manufacturing sites in the U.S. are being shut down permanently, resulting in a category of worker that is distinctly different from the unemployed worker—the displaced worker (Carroll et al., 2000; Daniels et al., 2000; Eberts, 2005; Helwig, 2001; Hollister, 2002; Magdoff, 2004).

In 1998, reports indicated that the booming economy meant that displaced workers (only 2.5% of the workforce, the lowest level of displacement in a decade) were able to “find new jobs with little or no change in weekly earnings” (Helwig, 2001, p. 2). Indeed, many displaced workers found jobs where their new salary was “20% more than ... on their lost job” (p. 37). In 2000, 78% of all displaced workers who had lost jobs in the late 1990s were reemployed and had more or less put their lives back together. However, since 2001, the “U.S. economy had a net loss of more than 2 million manufacturing jobs” (*National Review*, 2003, p. 1). While Helwig (2004) argued that this figure was “about the same as the 1.9 million (jobs lost) during the 1998 period” (p. 1), others pointed out that the last time the U.S. economy

gave away so many jobs in such a short time was “in the early 1930s during the Hoover administration” (*National Review*, p. 1). Either way, most have acknowledged that there is something different about the job losses that the U.S. economy is currently experiencing. Whereas formerly the laid-off workers could be termed unemployed, now they are more likely seen as displaced.

Displaced workers differ from unemployed workers not simply because “they have not been discharged for cause” (Jacobson et al., 2005a, p. 48); that is, through no fault of their own. While displaced workers may have “...a very small likelihood [of] being recalled to their old jobs” (p. 48), in most cases they will not be recalled. In the context of a globalizing economy, wherein the U.S. is shedding its manufacturing base, most of the jobs lost by displaced workers will not come back and many of the industries in which a displaced worker might hope to find other employment with his or her skills are also evaporating from the labor landscape of American life. This trend places a displaced worker in the extremely difficult position of having a skill set that may be of no value in the surviving economy. Thus, the displaced worker can also be defined by the fact that he or she must seriously consider changing industries or retraining for life in a new line of work.

Added to this stressful situation is the fact that many displaced workers have, by definition, worked for a long time at their company of employment and have a “strong prior attachment to the industry of their pre-displacement employer” (Jacobson et al., 2005a, p. 48). As a result of this long-term employment history, a displaced worker may not only have industry-specific but also firm-specific skills that

are based on a familiarity with the way of doing things in the offices or on the production lines of a specific company.

A final characteristic of displaced workers is linked to the issue of salary. An unemployed worker, when rehired, would return to work at the same salary level, and more or less pick up where he or she left off. However, for a displaced worker, “the temporary earnings losses associated with unemployment constitute only a small portion of the income losses associated with their layoffs” (Jacobson et al., 2005a, p. 47). If a displaced worker has to start over at an entry-level position in a new industry, he or she will “tend to suffer earnings losses” (p. 48). Sometimes, the earnings loss will be short-term; but, in many cases, displaced workers may continue to find themselves in a lower earning level for several years, and even permanently (p. 48). Due to these circumstances, in contrast with the merely unemployed worker, the displaced worker must adapt to a new frame of reference. The market environment of the current global economy is now “totally different” (Turner, 2004, p. 2), and the plant, company or even industry is most likely not going to reopen and re-offer workers their original jobs. Thus, one must “come to grips with the reality of the job market” (Eberts, 2005, p. 76). For workers, this means that “they are unlikely to find a job that pays the same as the job they lost” (Eberts, p. 76). They will have to be “resilient” and flexible (Barnett, 2004). While new workers need newer, more flexible skills, older workers must retrain. Therefore, retraining has become one of the primary initiatives designed to help displaced workers survive in the marketplace of today.

In order to drive home the fact that a permanent change has occurred in the U.S. economy, researchers have studied the nature of this change, and its impact on workers on the global, regional, industrial, and personal level. A brief review of these trends will underscore the fact that, for displaced workers, one must train for a new job or have no job. Consideration of these forces can also reveal why it is so difficult for displaced workers to be as flexible as the market demands they should be.

The problem of displaced workers is made more serious by the convergence of two large-scale forces: the increased demands for high-skilled jobs in the context of the world information-based economy, and the impending retirement of baby boomer workers, which will leave shortages in many industries (Mittelstadt, 2007; Sullivan, 2007). It is to address these issues that industries have begun to partner with community colleges in order to “guide tech-prep programs to address the required skill upgrades” (Mittelstadt, 2007, p. 3). Sullivan (2007) concurred that, as manufacturing evolves, it will “...require new skill sets for employees” (p. 48) rather than simply retraining them for traditional industries. More than 80% of manufacturers reported shortages of machinists, operators, craft workers and technicians, while 65% of companies reported shortages in engineers and technicians (Sullivan). Statistics such as these indicate why retraining of displaced employees should be a top priority in any state economic development plan.

Since the mid 1980s, structural changes have been occurring in various industries, resulting in layoffs that have turned out to be permanent (Jacobson et al., 2005a). In many cases, these plant closings were the result of fluctuations in market success and/or the general state of the U.S. economy. However, more recent plant

closings are linked to the “internationalization of production” (White, 2003, p. 497). In the new global economy, transnational companies have gone overseas to find cheap labor (White). This push to enhance company profitability by creating a new periphery of cheap labor in other countries has destabilized job security for all in the U.S. (Magdoff, 2004).

Historically, corporations have gained an upper hand over labor by having a reserve army of labor that management can call on when labor costs get too high. In order to reduce costs, they have made use of contract workers and outsourced labor. At present, this situation appears to have occurred on a national scale, with the workforce of peripheral nations becoming the “reserve army” by which U.S. labor is undercut. That is, “as the reserve army of labor in the periphery is now more directly available to capital from the center” this led to “an increasing relative surplus population in the U.S. and other rich countries” (Magdoff, 2004, p. 5). Moreover, the reserve labor force is growing in the U.S., not only consisting of the unemployed, but also the underemployed, immigrant labor, and even freelancers (Magdoff). The prospect for any member of the reserve army of labor is not positive, as “workers move from one segment of the reserve army to another, sometimes gaining employment and sometimes losing jobs, sometimes being so discouraged with the poor job market that they stop looking for work” (p. 6).

In the world of the reserve army of labor, “a very large number of people have personal knowledge of how insecure their jobs really are” (Magdoff, 2004, p. 6). Between 2000 and 2003, nearly 20% of all U.S. workers were laid off from their jobs, even as the same number of jobs were created. Furthermore, between January

2007 and December 2009, 6.9 million workers were displaced from their jobs (Northway, 2010). As a result, “given this level of job turnover, the atmosphere of potential job loss (even) reaches many workers who haven’t lost jobs” (Magdoff, p. 6). Overall, the climate of labor insecurity has kept labor movements passive and, as a result, the focus is on helping displaced workers find new work, not protesting against the loss of old work.

Added to the problems created for workers by this scenario is the theory that the economy has transitioned from industrial to postindustrial. This change began in the mid-1980s, when consumer taste for mass-produced goods was replaced by a taste for “individualized and specialized products” (White, 2003, p. 503). The rise of automation and especially computer technology has also dramatically altered the workplace. The work structures that have resulted rely primarily on information and knowledge, rather than on repetitive, low-skill work. While some theorize that such a workplace will enable greater worker input, others fear that the knowledge-oriented workplace will create a permanent barrier between knowledge and skill. Thus, an added burden to the stress of the displaced worker is the recommendation that, in addition to learning new skills, the new worker must also learn how to function in a new workplace environment based on knowledge (White). The spread of the high-tech, knowledge-based economy is occurring so rapidly that assumptions that were valid even a few years ago are being undermined. For example, until quite recently, it was thought that displacement was a problem of the industrial working-class who were caught in low-skilled jobs. However, high-tech and service companies are also



now quickly outsourcing certain information jobs to foreign shores, resulting in the creation of displaced information workers as well.

On a regional level, governments and agencies have finally realized that their economies are going through permanent structural changes. In the Northwest U.S., for example, the timber and woods industries have traditionally gone through cycles of boom and bust, with 24,700 jobs being lost between 1979 and 1991, yet most often regained. However, with the most recent spate of plant closings, or retooling of old plants with new technology, it is now realized that “the recent job decline represents a qualitatively different situation, a permanent structural shift in the ... economy away from its historical natural resource base” (Daniels et al., 2000, p. 136). North Carolina, has also witnessed substantial job losses since 1995, and recognizes that, this time, such losses are not the result of a business cycle but of “the global economy” which has restructured the shape of the regional economy (Sink & Hutto, 2004, p. 69).

Indeed, researchers of displaced workers are quite aware of the fact that displacement problems are “compounded in regions and communities where the employment and economic base centers on a single industry” (White, 2003, p. 498). Thus, when the single industry shuts down, or downsizes permanently, these closures are, in turn, followed by closures of small businesses that directly or indirectly support the lives of the workers in the single industry. As a result of this double effect, “employment opportunities outside the industry decline...leaving little alternative employment for displaced workers” (p. 498).

Some regions also “face a number of challenges in attracting and retaining skilled workers” (Mattoon, 2003, p. 1). In such regions, while some might see a low unemployment rate as good news, others see it as a sign of “the difficulty that state employers face in hiring” (Thomas, 2000, p. 13). A study in Iowa revealed that most of the workforce is aging, and that half of it will need to be replaced within five years, indicating an “impending crunch” when it comes to qualified labor (p. 13). On a region- and state-wide level, governments have had to plan strategies to improve the character and skill-set of the workforce. These programs have shifted priority from the outlay of capital to build infrastructure, or physical plant elements, to the cultivation of human capital. By this means, “regional work force development and education” strategies have become a critical element of a region or state’s efforts to “sustain economic health” (Mattoon, 2003, p. 1).

The reality is that regions and states must work from both ends of the economic development puzzle to meet their economic needs (Broderick, 2007). The assumption underlying most programs designed to train workers is that, once workers are trained, this will attract new investment, providing jobs for those workers. As a result, many governmental agencies think that retraining displaced workers alone will lead to economic development. However, if the region has a history of a single-industry climate and is unable to attract alternative employment opportunities, then retraining will yield nothing. The difficulties of this situation are reflected in the success rates and overall assessment of the impact of displaced worker retraining in the literature.

## **Retraining**

Further complicating the dynamics of displaced worker reemployment prospects is the fact that displacement levels are industry-determined, presenting special challenges to the task of retraining. The goods-producing industries continue to have higher levels of worker displacement than the service industries, with manufacturing, within the goods-producing industries, having a higher displacement rate than construction, which had the lowest rate (Helwig, 2004). The lowest service industry displacement rates are “in nonagricultural industries in the private sector” (Helwig, 2001, p. 2). While displacement rates are more or less the same for men and women, more educated displaced workers “fare better in the labor market than their less-educated counterparts” (p. 4). Although these basic distinctions—between goods and services, and higher- and lesser-educated—have been in place since the 1980s, an interesting or ominous trend, further reflecting intensification of economic restructuring, is that the gap in displacement rates between goods and services sectors has declined since the 1980s, and the educational differences between workers mean less among displaced workers than between unemployed workers (p. 4). The narrowing of these gaps indicates that displacement is spreading to previously protected areas of the workforce.

As to the issue of how well displaced workers do after they get a new job, or gain reemployment, a finding which bears directly on the question of the impact of community college retraining on worker outcomes, it is also apparent that while the rate of reemployment is relatively high (with 1.9 million of 2.3 million workers who lost full-time jobs in 2002, reemployed by 2003), the ability of displaced workers to

gain back all of their income is declining, with only 48% of those workers “earning as much or more in their new jobs as they had earned on the job they lost” (*National Review*, 2003, p. 1). Such trends indicate a new concern. While the government and its programs formerly assumed that any worker displaced by foreign imports will find a “comparable or better job,” and, indeed, that all displaced workers will eventually be reemployed, this can no longer be assumed. When it comes to finding better jobs after displacement, the fact of today’s labor market is that “most will not” (p. 1).

Overall, “displacing workers has become routine over the past two decades” (Hironimus-Wendt & Spannus, 2007, p. 83). Through no fault of their own, it is now estimated that almost 2 million U.S. workers are displaced each year. Most often, this occurs because of decisions made to reduce costs and transfer workers overseas, such as decisions by the Ford Motor Company to close plants in the U.S., leading to the displacement of almost 75,000 workers (Hironimus-Wendt & Spannus). In their study of the societal cost of a plant closing on local workers, Hironimus-Wendt and Spannus found that, after a year, about half of the displaced workers had found new jobs, while a third continued to live on unemployment. In addition, “across the year, the number of people taking advantage of education and training programs fluctuated, from a high of nearly 40% six months out, to half that many (18%) a year after the closing” (p. 85). The job losses also meant a decline in disposable income, and cutting back even on essentials. Psychologically, the “limbo” created by the uncertainty due to the job loss created a number of health care issues, with “depression, anger, anxiety, sleeplessness, feelings of worthlessness, and other psychological issues” commonly reported over a year after the

displacement (Hironimus-Wendt & Spannaus). On the basis of their study, Hironimus-Wendt and Spannaus concluded that the current theory behind worker retraining, which involves repositioning displaced workers in the “leftover local economy,” may be inadequate. This theory assumes that there will be enough jobs in the local economy to absorb displaced workers, and also that the “displaced workers can be made to fit those theoretically existing jobs with minimal effort” (Hironimus-Wendt & Spannaus, p. 90). In both instances, “this is not the case” (Hironimus-Wendt & Spannaus, p. 90).

### **Government and public programs to assist displaced workers**

Before reviewing efforts by community colleges to retrain displaced workers, it is necessary to briefly summarize the policy landscape in which such programs exist (Jacobsen & LaLonde et al., 2005a; Knowles, 2004; Simmers, 2003; Sink & Hutto, 2004). The number of private sector and government programs designed to help displaced workers confirm that more and more policymakers are coming to a full appreciation of the fact that “reemployment after job displacement is a complicated issue” (Simmers, 2003, p. 1). The policy options that have developed over time appear to consider the fact that people react to displacement in different ways, with some workers getting right back into work, others taking a “wait and see” attitude (perhaps, in denial, hoping the work will come back), while others quit looking for work, or retire (Simmers).

Many programs have been instituted by businesses, themselves, in order to retrain their own workers. Some companies have “created their own corporate

universities” in order to retrain employees (Addy & Ritchie, 2003, p. 23). Many of the community college programs to be reviewed are in fact created with financial support from local or regional businesses, to ensure a steady flow of qualified personnel (Addy & Ritchie,). Some companies have been created with the express purpose of retraining employees online, such as DeVry University or the University of Phoenix online, all part of a robust adult education business sector which gives community colleges competition for retraining displaced workers (Addy & Ritchie).

Government policy has also responded to the plight of the displaced worker. Formerly, the government response to unemployment was primarily “passive,” that is, the government gave unemployed and displaced workers (without distinguishing between the two) unemployment insurance which “offset about half of their earnings losses during the typical six month period where workers are eligible to collect benefits” (Jacobson et al., 2005a, p. 47). Such a response is termed “passive” because it is premised on the belief that the worker need only sit back and wait and work will return, or that it will not take that long for him or her to conclude a successful search for a new job. However, in the case of displaced workers, the difficult readjustments in the displaced worker’s life usually means that it will take more than six months to become reemployed, especially if the worker decides he or she has no choice but to retrain. As a result, the “passive” response to unemployment appears to be increasingly inadequate to serve displaced workers and their special needs.

The federal government has been making funds available to provide needed schooling and classroom and vocational training to unemployed or under-skilled

workers since the Area Development Act of 1962, the Manpower Development and Training Act of 1962 and the Trade Adjustment Assistance Act of 1962 (Jacobson et al., 2005a). With the emergence of what appeared to be restructuring-related layoffs in the mid-1980s, another wave of government programs was introduced at that point and in the early 1990s. Most of the programs developed at that time were designed to “mitigate the effects of displacement on individual workers” under the umbrella of the federal Jobs Training Partnership Act. This program package consisted of “two very different reemployment programs” (Daniels et al., 2000, p. 136). One kind of program was designed to “help dislocated workers cope with job loss by learning about career options, making informed choices, and developing a reemployment action plan” (p. 136). The other type of program, such as the Northwest Economic Adjustment Initiative, provided funding to business and community colleges in certain regions to offer retraining and reemployment programs in the local economy (Daniels et al.).

Perhaps modeled on the outplacement counseling programs that have been created over the last decade by corporations to assist laid-off workers weather the transition to a new job, government programs have increasingly placed an emphasis on career counseling and job search assistance for displaced workers (Butterfield, 2005). For example, laid-off workers in California may now go to any of 400 career centers funded by federal and state initiatives to receive career counseling, and even to take some classes leading toward retraining (Hollister, 2002). Success has been reported where retraining at such centers has resulted in trainees getting new jobs in different fields (Hollister).

The California centers also specialize in “rapid response” to the news of a layoff, often setting up a center on site in order to get displaced workers thinking about retraining and finding a new job before they get even become unemployed, a strategy which has been found to be quite effective (Hollister, 2002). Another increasingly popular program provided through the Dislocated Workers’ Program and the Trade Adjustment Assistance Act is job search assistance. These services not only help displaced workers familiarize themselves with new job markets, but they also help workers write resumes, letters, and practice job interviews. An evaluation of the effectiveness of these programs by workers has indicated that the programs need to have more counseling directed at the emotional difficulties that occur after displacement (Butterfield, 2005).

Whether or not government-funded retraining is successful or worth the investment is also a topic of debate in the literature. In the case of a retraining program instituted in the Buffalo Dislocated Worker Program, findings indicated that participation in the program “increased average earnings during the first six post-program months by about 65% of pre-displacement earnings” (Jacobson et al., 2005a, p. 57). The Texas Worker Readjustment Demonstration found that in a program administered to workers between the age of 34 and 54 who had held their prior job for more than ten years, participation in the program “raised participants’ earnings” (p. 48). The study revealed that men’s earning rose by 8% while women’s rose by nearly 34% (a disparity indicating the relatively lower-skill jobs that women were working) (Jacobson et al, 2005a.). Thus, while getting displaced workers to



participate in programs is a “tough challenge” (Knowles, 2004, p. 1), when they do, an increased post-displacement earnings as a result of retraining is seen.

While government programs are a strong presence on the displaced worker programming stage, it is also true that most government funded displaced worker retraining takes place in community colleges, and much of the retraining taking place in community college is in fact funded by the federal government (Owen & Fitch, 2003). The importance of community colleges in displaced worker retraining was first envisioned by the Comprehensive Dislocated Workers Initiative of 1994, which established the community college as the site for most retraining. While many continue to complain that the level of funding is not keeping up with the growing seriousness of the problem, and much in federal programming works against community college-based worker retraining, community colleges have become a center stage for the retraining of displaced workers.

## **Community colleges and retraining displaced workers: Theory and practice**

### **Retraining programs**

Community colleges have provided job-training programs for students for decades (Addy & Ritchie, 2003; Carlan, 2001; Evelyn, 2003; Fabes, 2007; Kapper, 2002; Reyes, 2002, *Community College Times*, 2010). While originally instituted at Joliet Community College in 1901 as an extension of high school, by the time of the Great Depression community colleges were deeply involved in “job training programs as a way to ease widespread unemployment” (Kapper, 2002, p. 2). The job-training focus of community colleges continued throughout the 1950s. In the

1960s and 1970s, the community college became “a major part of the American educational system” with a student enrollment of 4.3 million by 1980 (p. 2). Through this period, the emphasis was more on comprehensive educational programming, and also “community engagement” (Milliron, 2004, p. 1), with community colleges maturing into “engines of educational, economic and social development” (p. 1). Today, community colleges are committed to “lifelong learning” and thus provide education not only to traditional college-age students but also the non-traditional students of older age who return to college time and again during the course of their adult working life either for retraining or personal edification (Milliron).

It is fair to claim then that “no other segment of the postsecondary education has been more responsive to its community workforce needs” than community colleges (Kapper, 2002, p. 1). A special synergy in the community college retraining programs is that the tradition of community colleges in educating nontraditional students fuses neatly with the more urgent needs of blue-collar or older displaced workers. 32% of students enrolled in community colleges “are 30 years of age or older, and about 15% of students are 40 years of age or older” (Laanan, 2003, p. 758). In recent years, the mean age of the community college student has increased from 27 in 1990 to 29 in 1999, a change which indicates that community colleges are accommodating the needs of older displaced workers in need of retraining (Laanan, 2003). Community colleges are adept at customizing educational programs around the constraints that older adults have in their lives, such as ongoing work, or childcare responsibilities. As a result, not only are the offerings diverse in content or purpose, but also they are often scheduled at night or on weekends so adults can

attend classes around the busy schedules of their lives (Laanan). According to the adult education ethos of community colleges, they will teach “anyone, anywhere, anything” and thus offer numerous courses of academic interest to older adults seeking to enrich their lives (p. 760). Other programs are quite pointedly created with displaced workers in mind. In sum, the displaced worker easily fits as but one more part of the nontraditional student profile which community colleges have always served.

Many displaced workers who have often spent as much as 20 years in the workforce, balk at retraining because they cannot imagine themselves going back into a classroom after all those years. However, community college administrators are aware that nontraditional students are “uncomfortable in classrooms of 18-year-olds” and, thus, have accommodated their needs with special classes or non-classroom service (Lum, 2004, p. 3). This is another point of convergence where the fears of displaced workers are alleviated by the character of service in a community college. In keeping with a growing belief in lifelong learning as the only way to keep ahead of a changing economy, it is estimated that the nontraditional adult student population of community colleges will continue to increase (Carlan, 2001).

As a result of this alignment between displaced worker needs and community college offerings, it is no surprise that the community college was selected as the site for most government-funded displaced worker retraining programs. With funds from the Workforce Investment and Trade Adjustment Acts, Chattanooga College retrained 125 displaced workers in the hope of getting them back into the workforce within two years (Turner, 2004). The Center for Workforce Development was created

at Skyline College in California with the express purpose of providing a “rapid response to massive layoffs in the wake of United Airlines tailspin into bankruptcy” (Simmers, 2003, p. 1). A local biotechnology firm, Genetech, became involved with funding to help Skyline design a course of study that would retrain airline workers as biotechnology workers, and many of the retrained workers were indeed hired by Genetech (Simmers). The Michigan Technical Education Center created with government and business funding at Bay de Noc Community College in northern Michigan is a “model presented for potential replication” of a training program that also was successful in getting workers back to work in a short time (Russell, 2001, p. 704).

In Iowa, Kirkwood Community College responded to the growth of the high tech industry of the state, in a belt from Cedar Rapids to Iowa City, by joining with McLeod USA, a company whose locations “straddle its campus” (Thomas, 2000, p. 14), to create a training course that enabled displaced workers to learn electronics and/or computer mainframe work, as well as personal computing. A new business technology center was opened, serving up to 700 students, many of them displaced workers being retrained to take part in Iowa’s surprising shift from agriculture to technology (Thomas). While the McLeod-sponsored technology training program got off to a slow start, attracting only four displaced workers, it retooled itself to better accommodate the lifestyle time constraints of adult workers, and began to attract more workers (Thomas).

In spite of the fact that the literature details a number of success stories, much of the continued evolution of displaced worker training at community schools is

fueled by ongoing debates between the needs of workers in terms of short-term labor expediency and lifelong learning, and between the workforce-related or purely educational ends of community college involvement in their lives. Because community colleges often become concerned with educational quality and the mission of lifelong learning, some researchers have raised a question regarding whether or not they are able to “deliver what business needs” (Addy & Ritchie, 2003, p. 22). Businesses and workers demand fast action and keeping up with the cutting edge, while the bureaucracy at colleges remains slower, with “layers of approval and oversight upon curricular decision” (p. 22). Businesses want skills, and more skills, and it is the community college system that ties skill-learning to larger purposes linked to certification or degrees.

Some analysts believe that the displaced worker phenomenon must be placed in the context of what is long-term unemployment in order for its costs to society to be understood (Moberg, 2007; Neill & Shirle, 2007). In general, unemployment today is becoming more long-term, with many workers remaining marginally or only employed part-time for years afterward. Therefore, government response to displaced workers has had to increasingly include “preventive action, protect living standards, improve connections to employment, enhance workforce skills and foster entrepreneurial initiative” (Moberg, p. 23). Nevertheless, programs such as Worker Retraining in the state of Washington, which “provides advice and early funding for classes at Washington’s 34 community and technical colleges” (Monson, 2006, p. 1) have been shown to be helpful to displaced workers. This program was apparently successful because it built upon the recognition that

displaced workers are going through a traumatic experience, thus provided “hand-holding and helping participants scale the mountain of paperwork they typically face” (Monson, p. 2).

### **Job loss and mental health**

A number of studies have found that the mental health problems related to job loss have, in the past, interfered with retraining and other efforts to get the workers back on their feet (Moore, Grunberg, Greenberg, & Sikora, 2007). These authors examined whether or not the worker's perception of why they lost the job, and their role in the job loss, impacted whether or not they suffered depression or anxiety after job loss. Research has shown that workers who blame their job loss on external forces, as opposed to internal attributions such as not being qualified for the job, cope better and have better self-esteem during the job loss period (Moore et al., 2007). This kind of attribution is important in that it has been found to impact “the type of job search behavior and/or retraining they seek” (p. 73). The study also revealed that most people who lose a job need to give the impression that it was their decision, in order to maintain some control over the decision. As a result, displaced workers, by definition of losing their jobs as a result of a force beyond their control, experience more depression and anxiety as a result of job loss. This study empirically validated that retraining programs for displaced workers in particular need to take mental health issues into consideration and even include such topics in the curriculum.

In partial response to fine-tuning retraining efforts, many community colleges have examined more carefully the needs of adult learners, to better tailor learning and training itself to their needs.

### **Retraining and adult learning theory**

Several of the problems in the current implementation of displaced worker retraining at community colleges may be attributable to a culture clash between the educational and business communities. More researchers are addressing how to offer optimum reemployment programs for displaced workers, and finding that practice needs to be aligned more with adult education theory, in order to expedite the process. Indeed, reemployment programs are arguably influenced, in their formulation, by two broad areas of research, “career theory and adult education” (Daniels et al., 2000, p. 138). Both theories are important as they “take a systemic view of the individual, placing the worker within a complex web of personal, social and community relationships” (p. 138). Specifically, “career theory studies the role of work in people’s lives” (p. 138). The theory examines how work influences all other aspects of one’s life, and, indeed, is often a foundation of one’s self-identity. As a result, “losing a job means more than losing a wage, it means losing a way of life, a way of thinking about one’s self and one’s place in the world” (p. 138).

Career theory explains why, when something like a layoff, or a displacement occurs, customary coping strategies fail, and the worker falls into anger and depression. The theory also examines how the worker can develop a new coping strategy: it considers the possibility that the resulting changes may be taken as an

opportunity to explore part of him- or herself that he or she did not previously.

Informed by career theory, it is necessary for a community college program to be open to respond to any of the displaced worker's needs, even if they are not entirely practical.

Adult education theory informs the creation of retraining efforts, as it is through this framework that workers may be helped to better understand their experience, and thus cope with it more effectively (Daniels et al., 2000). Informed by this theory, retraining programs for older adults should not simply run through the material or content in a mechanical way, but frame instruction in such a way as the person develops as a critical thinker or problem solver who can analyze, design and evaluate working processes on the job more effectively (Daniels et al., p.139).

Given these double streams of research flowing into efforts to further refine and enhance community college efforts to retrain displaced workers, it is not surprising that at present many community colleges are being pushed and pulled between converging but still divergent interests. On the one hand, businesses are "relying on community colleges" to quickly train displaced workers, and replenish the worker supply for their businesses (Milliron, 2004). Competing with for-profit adult training programs or companies, community colleges often feel even more pressure to expedite results. At the same time, community colleges are dedicated to lifelong learning, and have had a long history with the practice of lifelong learning (Armitage, 2004). They have historically emphasized the importance of the development of the person in an adult learner, in the context of continuing education, and resist the increasingly pragmatic impulse to reduce education to mere skill learning (Armitage).



Milliron (2004) termed the situation in which community colleges are caught, having to accommodate fast-track demands at the same time that they meets the very diverse needs of an ever-diversifying student body, the “learning swirl,” as demands, needs, programs, and change continue to become “increasingly swirled” in their complexity (p. 3).

The combination of career theory and adult education theory as it informs reemployment training also dovetails into recent research on how persons, especially older adults, learn at work (Hodkinson, Hodkinson, Evans, Kersh, Fuller, et al., 2004). The paradox of learning at work is that even as the employee works as part of a group, one learns as an individual. Formerly, it was theorized that the individual mind and the social world (or workplace, for example) were “two separate entities” even if they were interrelated. Others argue that the mind is not separate but housed in a body and that as a result it is the whole person who learns in a social setting. Much of the recent research on how people learn at work is framed in the participation metaphor and “stresses the significance of belonging to communities of practice, and learning as part of a process of becoming a full member of a team” (p. 7). Thus, workers respond to the opportunities presented to them in a new job by bringing prior knowledge to bear upon them.

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus in which persons represent the structures of life through their behavior, is also useful. A habitus can be seen as “made up of largely internalized, subconscious battery of dispositions that orients a person’s actions in any situation” (Hodkinson et al., 2004, p. 8). In a habitus, dispositions are produced as an amalgam of individual and social processes, and result in a construct that is

not the same as one's identity, but closely "interrelated" to it (p. 8). The practical importance of such a construct for viewing both learning on the job and learning in training by older adults is that learners bring prior skills with them, they have a perspective on certain tasks, that some skills may resonate with meaning, and that they bring a lot of emotions and perspectives to new learning (Hodkinson et al). Thus, when retraining an employee, one cannot simply focus on the tasks at hand in a de-contextualized situation. Rather, one must take into account the attitudes, life experiences and prior skills which form a basis for the worker relating to the new job he or she must undertake (Hodkinson et al.). In the case of a group of workers being retrained on the job in the steel industry, it was found that the training resulted in faster, better attainment of the new skills when the "employees' prior skills and abilities were known and encouraged by his employer" (p. 10).

The importance of improved conceptualizations of how workers learn on the job is that these ideas are being used to better inform the training of workers in classroom situations at community colleges. Moreover, this conceptualization of how workers learn on the job also has strong parallels with adult learning theory, suggesting a pending convergence of findings. Extensive literature has addressed the different ways in which adults learn. Without tailoring one's practice to the theory of adult learning, it does not seem likely that a retraining program for such a sensitive group of students as adult displaced workers could possibly be successful. However, with the help of adult education theory, it seems likely that community colleges and workplaces can in time forge a seamless flow along a "learning swirl"

where displaced workers or any workers needing to “return to school” will even think of the retraining in those black-and-white terms.

Adult education theory has previously informed much of the curricula and structure of teaching in community colleges and it is necessary to ensure that such a framework is accentuated for retraining programs (Armitage, 2004; Brown, 2005; Dayton, 2005; Hodkinson et al., 2004; Sisola, 2004). In this theory, it has been determined that older students, having been out in the workplace, are more self-directed learners “for whom learning is inherently joyful” and are thus more committed to their classroom work (Carlan, 2001, p. 2). Moreover, adult students are more problem-solving oriented, and like their learning to have an immediate applicability to problems in their lives. Findings have indicated that this does not mean that adult learners want classrooms to become experiential lessons, as they prefer a mix of lecture and discussion (Carlan). Studies have revealed that most adult learners enter community colleges “for a specific purpose, and possess a sense of urgency in pursuit of those objectives” (p. 10). As a result, these adult learners are more ready to learn, and are often more successful than younger students. Studies have repeatedly shown that older adult students “outperform traditional-aged students in academic endeavors” due to their maturity, and experience (p. 9).

While this is the good news, the less favorable fact about adult learning is that as adults are also burdened with real-life demands, jobs, families and interests, “...adult student persistence to graduation is slower than that of younger students” (Carlan, 2001, p. 3). Moreover, adults often feel intimidated “upon returning to college”

and often feel inadequate to learn what they must. As a result, it is necessary for instructors of adult learners to let them “pace themselves for optimal results” (p. 2).

While grounded in empirical observation and understanding of the ways adults learn, adult education theory is also framed by a coherent theory of how older people learn, developed by Malcolm Knowles, called the andragogical theory of adult learning (Reyes, 2002, p. 3). Knowles argued that adult education must be based on five assumptions about adult learning. As learners, adults “are self-directed learners, they build on prior experience, they respond to a need to perform more effectively, they want real-world application for learning and they are motivated by internal factors such as self-esteem, recognition, natural curiosity and an innate love of learning” (p. 3).

Lawson added to this construct by asserting that adults like to be involved in planning and setting the objectives for their learning, and also in evaluating their learning plans (Reyes, 2002). The most significant practical outcome of this theory is that, for adults, learning must be contextualized within a problem-centered real-life context where the adults have a need to know something in order to improve their life or actualize their sense of self (Harris, 2003). Such learning, learning from experience, is a “unique meaning-making event that creates diversity among adult learners” by using past life experiences in the learning process (p. 1).

In addition to outlining what the overall framework of adult learning should be, adult learning theory has formulated *how* adults learn as well. Many adults bring with them into class “taken for granted beliefs” concerning reality, often called “rules of thumb” (Brown, 2005, p. 3). Because such unexamined assumptions are part of the

mindset of adults, adult education must work hard to make adults reflect upon or critique the assumptions by which they have lived. A primary theoretician of adult learning, Mezirow termed such belief structures a “meaning perspective” consisting of “a structure of cultural assumptions, a personal paradigm, or an orienting frame of reference” which encompasses all the thoughts and feelings of the person. It is this structure which is the object of most adult learning theory (p. 3).

A number of approaches have been developed, stemming from Mezirow, which seek to upset the meaning perspective of adult learners. Schon and Argyris developed the idea of “action science,” which focuses on experiences where, the results having been hypothesized, were not then obtained (Brown, 2005). The authors theorize that most adults think in a process they term Model I, that is, they engage in single-loop learning and do not examine their assumptions. However, when presented with a situation where an assumption failed, students must face a Model II construct, and thus begin to see how “learning is controlled by the degree to which (they) examine their assumptions” (p. 2). This process, called double-loop learning, has become a basic model for many exercises in adult learning contexts. Through double loop learning, one “calls into question the assumptions underlying normal, habitual ways of thinking and acting” (p. 1). As such, double-loop learning has become an umbrella term which also refers to Schon’s theory of reflective practice, and John Peters reflective practice paradigm, where one “thoughtfully reflects upon the reasons and assumptions that direct one’s behavior in order to improve one’s effectiveness as a professional” (p. 3). This is true of Stephen Brookfield’s critical thinking approach which involves exercises where the learner

also calls assumptions into question with the goal of developing a sense of “reflective skepticism” with regard to ideas (p. 3). Coupled with communicative learning, which situates all such exercises in discourse with other students and the teacher, the framework of double-loop learning as practiced in adult learning classrooms is clear. On a practical level, an adult learning classroom will welcome adult students who continue to think in Model I terms, and set about helping them begin to think reflectively in a Model II way. Model I thinking is believed to be the kind of thinking that is most effective in emergencies, or situations where “unilateral action” is called for (p. 2), and Model II is better for “difficult, out of the ordinary situations that cannot be solved without looking deeper into the underlying values and assumptions” (p. 2). It is highly likely that a displaced worker having learned firm-specific skills in one field will have a Model I-type way of thinking, but he or she will now need to function mentally on a Model II level, both to negotiate the complexities of displacement and also to work effectively in new jobs in the new economy (Brown, 2005).

Mezirow also emphasized that in double-loop learning will transform one's perspective on life and the world (Brown, 2005, p. 4). Perspective transformation also involves a “process of critical reflection” on the assumptions that frame one's life (Sisola, 2004, p. 1). Nevertheless, more pointedly, the ultimate goal of such reflection is to get adult individuals to at last “act on their own values and beliefs, rather than on those assimilated from others” (Sisola, p. 1). In life, one has developed many assumptions through the process of socialization and assimilation, in order to fit in at workplaces or in life. As a result of these practices, people “live in

the comfort of the familiar and are not aware that they are held captive by distortions” (Brown, 2005, p. 2). The task of adult learning is to finally break free, with the hope that as adults people can “gain greater control over their lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers” (Sisola, 2004, p. 1). Perspective attends to the particular complexity of this process. While one’s perspective may be transformed by a sudden and shocking moment, incremental transformation is also possible, especially, as theory argues, when it is important to not simply see things from a new perspective but live life from a new perspective (Sisola, 2004).

Altogether, perspective transformation or double-loop adult learning makes the classroom into a construct that functions more like the workplace or real life to adults. As a result, such learning plays a much more direct part in the professional development of students (Reyes, 2002). Through the learning community model, adult students learn in classrooms in a way that almost feels like on-the-job learning. Moreover, they not only learn new content and skills but also reflect on their learning critically, a lifelong skill that has been deemed essential to the new economy (Reyes, 2002). Thus far, studies as to the effectiveness of the implementation of the theory to practice have been, not so much mixed, as cautious. As Mezirow warned, there is nothing comfortable about double-loop learning, and many students may balk at being coaxed free from long-held assumptions. Although some students may feel “liberation and excitement” as many will feel “anxiety about the unfamiliar territory” and will therefore resent the teacher and struggle to make sense of the learning (Brown, p. 4). Moreover, in a study of adult learning classrooms it was found that most learning still occurs in a de-contextualized fashion, and that “uneven power

relationships between teachers and students is not particularly surprising” (Purcell-Gates, 2001, p. 12). Indeed, some adult learners prefer a mix of traditional and more advanced learning. Many community colleges, moreover, have been stretched to provide the content of instruction for jobs in the service-oriented economy, and thus have not had the funds or time to encourage more theoretically-based learning (Owen & Fitch, 2003).

### **Challenges of retraining**

There is limited research in the literature on the effectiveness of retraining programs for displaced workers, with the majority of the studies evaluations of single-case studies (White, 2003). However, when retraining is viewed within the framework of adult education, the impact of retraining on displaced workers presents a broader picture. One must take into consideration not only whether or not the displaced worker learned the skills taught and was able to get a job, but also the entire emotional nature of the displacement experience, the coping mechanisms involved in the process of deciding to undergo retraining, and, of course, the reality that many displaced workers make inopportune decisions about retraining. Of equal importance are all of the displaced workers whom the system has not yet been able to convince to retrain. For this reason, while a number of specific programs have showed positive results, many other researchers continue to lament that “two-year colleges have failed to provide enough short-term training programs, do not know (enough about) which jobs to train dislocated workers for, and are allocated funds from the state in a way that makes it difficult for them to do more” (Evelyn, 2003, p.



A20). Even community college officials have complained that certain federal programs are not in tune to worker needs, do not understand the challenges workers face, and “require too much paperwork” (p. A31).

The manner in which the displacement process itself has been viewed has limited the ability of researchers to properly measure the impact of retraining programs. Up to now, most analysts have “assumed that displaced...workers will respond to displacement similarly” (Carroll et al., 2000, p. 110). However, newer studies argue that researchers need to “develop a better understanding of the range of attributes which influence workers’ choice of strategy in adapting to job loss” (p. 110). One must look at the “employment history, life skills, pre-layoff standard of living, worker life stage, family circumstances and income ... community and (even) rurality” in order to properly gauge how displaced workers will respond to retraining (p. 110). For example, it has been found that, given their assumptions about work and the marketplace, many displaced workers are naïve about “how long it may take to find a job” (Knowles, 2004, p. 1). As a result, many displaced workers wait too long before seeking reemployment and, by then, they have already become caught in negative thought patterns which are counterproductive to the reemployment process (Knowles, 2004).

In a study of displaced workers Daniels et al. (2000) found differing types. Some workers continued, after a year, to just survive. They had “not recovered from dislocation” and “financial worries consumed their priorities” as they had thus far only taken a series of part-time jobs to patch together an income that was nowhere near where their former wage level was (p. 140). However, others had begun to adjust,

though at different levels of success. While some workers had begun to adjust to the reality that they would have to move into a different line of work, they had “not reached secure and steady employment” (p. 142). Still others had retrained and were more or less satisfied that the dislocation trauma was over. Finally, some participants in the study had simply “redefined their occupational perceptions, awakened new talents and desires” and had holistically transformed their self-identity (p. 142). While most of the displaced workers in this study had adjusted, older workers tended to do so less well, and many had resisted leaving their old field of work (Daniels et al.). This finding indicates that “individual psychology and social context have at least as much impact on satisfactory career transitions as retraining does” (p. 148).

This is where adult learning theory is enlightening, as it is apparent that unless adult workers are open to change, willing to take risks, think in new ways, and change their expectations about work and life, it is unlikely they will challenge themselves through retraining. Moreover, in order for the retraining program to be truly successful, the course must be infused with adult learning theory (Daniels et al., 2000). Thus, programmatically, displacement must be seen as a potentially positive experience, for all of its immediate negatives. Moreover, a good retraining program must take into account more than just job skills, but strive to achieve four “interrelated goals”: it must help workers cope with the stress of job loss, identify new career aspirations, acquire new skills, and finally “effectively market these skills” (p. 136). Given these admittedly “daunting challenges” it is no surprise that, when

measured against these goals, “results show that reemployment programs have modest success at best” (p. 136).

While some researchers focused on the individual worker, others argued that there remain structural forces influencing worker adjustment. Educated workers tend to do better in job loss situations, and the same is true when they are displaced, and when they see a need to retrain. Most educated displaced workers find themselves in their situation because a position was eliminated, rather than a plant closing (Helwig, 2001). Studies have revealed that “individuals with more education are more likely to retrain after job displacement” (Helwig, 2004, p. 3). Moreover, when laid off, educated workers “typically spend less time without a job” (Helwig, 2001, p. 16). Age is also a factor, as younger workers, when laid off, “spent the least time without work” (p. 16).

An added problem with factory or blue-collar workers is that, in addition to having developed a longstanding loyalty to their employers, they have not kept abreast of changes in the marketplace. As a result, studies find that they lack the “networks, capital and experience needed to function” independently in the market (Daniels et al., 2000, p. 145). Most will settle for secure rather than better-paying jobs (Barnett, 2004). Many will sink into a sense of being overwhelmed, unless the displacement program gets to them “as soon as the layoff is announced” (Eberts, 2005, p. 80).

Generally, industrial workers spend a longer time between jobs, once displaced, than white collar workers (Helwig, 2001). Even within industries, manufacturing workers will spend a longer time jobless than construction workers

(Helwig, 2001). These gaps reflect the trend of the economy away from goods and towards service industries. An important factor contributing to the problems of displaced manufacturing workers is that fewer of them deem it necessary to leave their field. More manufacturing workers, than in any other sector, choose to hold out for employment in the same field, even if it means a pay cut or loss of benefits (Knowles, 2004). This strategy flies in the face of statistical evidence that only construction or service industry displaced workers are most likely to find jobs in their same industry (Helwig, 2004). In one study of displaced manufacturing workers, 60% of workers found work in the “same occupational group” (p. 5), although the jobs were not equal to the lost jobs. Buss and Redburn’s classic study of steel workers as long ago as 1983 “...showed that the majority (of displaced workers) attempted to find employment in similar jobs, with about one third finding jobs in manufacturing and the remainder experiencing unemployment” (Carroll & Blatner et al., 2000, p. 97). Most did not seek retraining, because “many were waiting for the mill to reopen” (p. 97). From the perspective of transformative education, many steel workers felt that their work was more than a job, but a way of life “and some workers believed retraining would not help them” (p. 97).

In addition, their decision was not due to blind stubbornness; rather, it was sometimes a calculated weighing of options. The workers saw that, once displaced, they had three options: retrain for a “promising new field,” (Carroll et al., 2000, p. 96), not retrain but move into service, or wait it out and find work in the same field. Retraining was generally viewed as the “most costly” and thus not available to some, while working low-pay service was not desired. Therefore, many decided on the

security and expediency of taking a lower-paying job in the same field, simply to “stabilize the worker’s life and earnings” (p. 96). Many further rejected retraining because, reviewing the program offered, did not think it adequate in terms of time or treatment, or that it left them out of work without income for too long of a time (p. 109).

In an issue relevant to Model I thinking, workers in numerous fields see their work as a way of life, not just a job. This was starkly proven in a study comparing the adjustment of laid off workers in the logging and sawmill working industries (Carroll et al., 2000). While workers in the sawmills viewed their work as roughly equivalent to any other manufacturing job, loggers “were characterized by strong occupational identity” and viewed logging as a way of life, in nature, with deep traditions, and roots in the region, not therefore a job one would want to leave (p. 101). As a result, most loggers in the study “found a way to stay in logging, although this generally meant sacrifices in wages, job security, benefits and perceived safety” (p. 110).

Finally, once they pass a certain age, many blue-collar workers simply “did not want to be retrained” (Carroll et al., 2000, p. 110). Not only were they reluctant to leave the field, but they also saw retirement as an option. They also looked around and saw no real alternatives in the region, in terms of good jobs, and would not consider relocating. Looking only at their surrounding community, these workers were likely to say: “...what’s the point of retraining if there are no jobs available” (White, 2003, p. 502). Nor did they think they could go so long without a job or money. This finding is likely due to the fact that their mindset wants to “secure enough money and other benefits just to make it day to day” (Evelyn, 2003, p. A23).

In their minds, “they would rather get by on odd jobs or flip burgers, even at a fraction of their former pay, than go to college” (p. A23). While acknowledging their reluctance to change, Evelyn did point out that today even Burger King requires a general equivalency diploma. Finally, workers “over 50 years....were less likely to participate in retraining than younger counterparts” (Carroll & Blatner et al., p. 109).

### **Impact of retraining**

The reemployment rate of displaced workers in a 2002 report on employment found that 76% were working, indicating some success in adjustment or programming (Helwig, 2004). Most of the displaced workers were also working at a pay level comparable to previous salary (Helwig, 2001). Individuals with more education and in the age range of 30 to 40 were also more likely to be reemployed through the process of retraining (Simmers, 2003). In a survey of displaced reemployed workers in their thirties and forties, 3 of 5 “made a willing choice to be retrained in a new career field” (Carroll et al., 2000, p. 106).

Many anecdotal reports indicated that retraining has a positive impact on the lives of displaced workers. However, the research also suggested that “retraining participants may inaccurately attribute much of the ultimate career outcome to the training program” when in reality, labor market, social forces or “sheer luck” may have had just as big a part in their reemployment as training (Daniels et al., 2000, p. 148). A study of Pell Grant program retrainees revealed a more quantifiable measure of success of the program; the reemployed displaced workers found jobs along with a significant increase in their salary levels (Jacobson et al., 2005b).

Another program found that 80% of its 2000 participants were “reemployed within seven to nine months after completing training” and had regained “90 per cent of their previous salary levels” (Nafziger & Rhodes, 2003, p. 2). Further study revealed that of displaced workers now reemployed, “42% preferred their new jobs” while 32% preferred their old jobs (Simmers, 2003, p. 2).

While these studies indicate positive impact, others suggest a less favorable view of training. One study found that three-fourths of retrained workers were not making use of any of the skills gained in training in their new jobs (Carroll et al., 2000). 86% of retrained workers, moreover, were simply not in jobs or in the field which they were retrained for. It was also found that the retraining did not improve their income, or even their odds in gaining reemployment in the marketplace (Carroll et al., 2000). Even community college officials concede that, after retraining, it may take “a few years on the job before the former workers will earn as much as they were making” in the old job (Evelyn, 2003, p. A33).

Two formal studies on the impact of retraining displaced workers form the foundation of the literature on this topic. These studies examined the effectiveness of the Texas Workers Adjustment Demonstration and the New Jersey Unemployment Insurance Reemployment Demonstration, both in the mid-1980s (Eberts, 2005). The Texas study “found substantial earnings impact for women but smaller and shorter-lived impacts for men” (p. 79). That is, participation in the retraining program not only allowed displaced workers to find new work in a new field, but they also experienced an 11% gain in income as a result (Jacobson et al., 2005b, p. 59). The New Jersey study “also yielded positive effects in the short run”

(Eberts, p. 79). However, none of these gains were “statistically significant” (p. 79). Another more recent study of WIA Dislocated worker programs in a number of different states also revealed that “training can have positive effects over and above those found for job search assistance programs” (p. 80).

Jacobson et al. (2005a) made use of a human capital framework to study specifically the earnings impact of retraining programs. The study revealed that the impact of community college retraining of older and younger adults is comparable to the overall perceived benefits of an education. In the study, it was concluded that “a year of community college credits raises displaced workers’ earnings by about 9 percent for men and by about 13 percent for women” (p. 59). However, only with males, was evidence found for the “sheepskin effect,” that is, that simply studying for a degree, lead to increased earnings gains (p. 59). Indeed, the study revealed “little evidence (overall) that displaced workers benefit financially from completing less quantitative vocational or academic courses” (p. 59). This finding emphasizes how important it is for displaced workers to plan before retraining, as only enrollment in the “appropriate courses” will yield earnings gains.

There is little question that, on a personal level, any earnings increase due to retraining must be viewed as a positive impact of retraining. Moreover, from the point of view of adult learning theory, retraining and reemployment will not only help a displaced worker erase the trauma of the lay-off experience, but grow as a human being. However, on a purely cost-benefit analysis level, with regard to public expenditures, the gains made by retrained older adults are “less impressive” (Jacobson et al., 2005b, p. 7). From the point of view of society, and public



investment in retraining, adjustments of gains showed that “society gained only modestly when older displaced workers were retrained” (p. 18). The benefits of retraining younger workers are “markedly larger” (p. 18). While conceding that it is difficult to measure the impact of such retraining on a personal or public level, overall the conclusion must be that retraining results in “small” impacts and can only be construed as ultimately worthwhile from a long-term perspective (Jacobson et al.). Indeed, from a purely monetary point of view, the study found that for the older displaced worker to gain a \$7000 increase in earnings per year, it cost “roughly \$70,600 in retraining expenses,” meaning that the cumulative gain would be ten years in coming (Mattoon, 2003, p. 4). Thus, while acknowledging that “old dogs can be taught new tricks”, with all the positives that go along with retraining, Jacobson et al. (2005a) also concluded with the question “but is it a good investment?” (p. 60).

In a more targeted study, Jacobson et al. (2005b) examined the effectiveness of community-college based displaced worker retraining programs supported by the federal Trade Adjustment Assistance Act, the Economically Displaced Worker Adjustment Act, and the 1972 Higher Education Amendments (Pell grants). The findings revealed that women are more likely than men to enroll in community college-based training, but no more likely to complete courses. Also “older displaced workers were much less likely to enroll in community college courses than their younger counterparts, and when they enrolled in courses they were less likely to complete at least one course” (p. 15). Moreover, workers with a high school diploma are more likely to enroll in community-based college courses than those without (Jacobson et al.).

In addition to providing this kind of demographic results, Jacobson et al. (2004) also determined the impact of the community college-based retraining courses on the income levels of retrained workers. The study revealed that the impact for displaced workers is “somewhat larger, but still consistent” with the findings in the literature, which concluded that “the equivalent of a year of community college credits raises displaced workers’ earnings by about 7 per cent for men and by about 11 percent for women” (p. 17). This is true even if the courses were not completed. Finally, larger gains were made for those displaced workers who were able to complete technical or scientific courses, especially health-related courses (Jacobson et al.). This was true, however, only with younger workers, as older workers were only able to gain about 3 to 5% in salary as a result of taking a community college course. As a result, “these gains are much smaller than those reported in the literature on formal schooling and suggest that for some displaced workers and for society, the gains from such retraining may not offset the costs” (p. 19). With older workers especially, who have only a few years remaining in their working life, they may well “have been better off had they not enrolled in any courses” (p. 20). Overall, Jacobsen et al. (2004) concluded that “community college retraining may not be for everyone” and is only truly beneficial for “younger and female displaced workers” (p. 22). Generally, community college-based retraining of displaced workers is useful only when the workers’ prior skills are high and they take high-return courses that have a high degree of likelihood of guaranteeing them future employment.

## Summary

This review of literature examined the increasingly prevalent problem of displaced workers, that is, workers who are permanently laid off from a job and a field of work by structural changes in the global economy. Data reveal that displaced manufacturing workers are the least likely of all career clusters surveyed to be reemployed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). Because of their unique situation, it is best for these workers to retrain for future employment in other fields. With a history of technical and job-related education, community colleges have become heavily involved in retraining displaced workers, through both federally funded programs and the more recent initiative of short-term certificate programs (Knowles, 2004; Jacobsen et al., 2005a, b; Laanan, 2003; Simmers, 2003; Sink & Hutto, 2004). Supported by and infused with adult learning theory, retraining for displaced workers has become a central mission of many community colleges (Armitage, 2004; Brown, 2005; Dayton, 2005; Sisola, 2004). The question remains, Are these programs doing all they can to meet the needs of displaced workers? In order to answer this question it was necessary to utilize the broader adult learning perspective to consider the whole picture of the experience of the displaced worker. Displaced workers respond to their situation in many different ways, based on their age, gender, personality, industry, and even whether or not they live in the city or country. Many displaced workers do not take the optimal route to reemployment, which would be to retrain for a new life in a new industry, but prefer to stay in the old industry, even at less pay, or remain in a particular region, for reasons other than money. Many others simply refuse to retrain for various reasons. The reality of these

workers' experience must be factored into any appraisal of the impact of retraining. Retraining at community colleges will not only lead to potential new jobs in new fields, but in many cases, may increase their earnings. Whether or not such retraining is cost-effective for older workers remains a question (Jacobsen et al., 2004, 2005b); nevertheless, a conclusion resulting from this literature review is that retraining is a positive experience both for the individual worker and the economy at large.

### CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The primary purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of the experiences of displaced manufacturing workers as they lose jobs and retrain in a community college setting. The experiences displaced workers face with job loss and subsequent retraining were examined through their unique descriptions of events and personal stories by using Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory. This adult learning theory considers "the process of making new or revised interpretations of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action" (Mezirow, 1991, p.1).

The qualitative research design was most appropriate for this study. According to Strauss and Corbin (1990), "...some areas of study naturally lend themselves more to qualitative types of research, for instance, research that attempts to uncover the nature of persons' experience with a phenomenon" (p. 19). More specifically, this qualitative study applied phenomenological tradition to reveal descriptions of "...the meaning of the lived experiences for several individuals about a concept or a phenomenon" (Creswell, 1998, p. 51). This approach enabled the researcher to look more closely at the experiences of displaced workers through their own words as they described their thoughts and feelings as well as how they constructed meaning from the point of job displacement through retraining. The researcher believes that the findings of this study will be helpful to employers, organized labor unions and community college personnel as they each

attempt to meet the needs of increasing numbers of displaced manufacturing workers.

### **Research Design**

Qualitative research may be found in many disciplines from History to Sociology to Political Science (Miles & Huberman, 1994). While each discipline has its own way of approaching its subjects, the critical factor in any application of qualitative research is the primary objective to understand the meaning of an experience (Merriam, 1988).

Qualitative research requires the ability to consider multiple perspectives and allows for the possibility of multiple truths (Polkinghorne, 1983). It pushes the researcher to put aside preconceptions, notions and judgments about the experience(s) under study. As such, qualitative research is a highly subjective approach which uncovers interpretation rather than measures it (Bogden & Bilken, 2003). These interpretations, in the form of words, are the pieces that work together to make up the whole of an experience (Merriam, 1988). The trauma of job loss and uncertainty of future well-being will undoubtedly be experienced in many ways. To understand the range of experiences (both in type and intensity), the researcher must be able to enter this mass of feelings (or internal world of the respondents). A qualitative research design provides the opportunity to honor the feelings and thoughts presented, capture the expression of those feelings and thoughts through dialogue, and value the unique perspective and range of experiences of each respondent.

### **Constructivist Theory**

The epistemology for this study was constructivism. Constructivist thought maintains that the wide range of human experience is so different from the physical world that a rational, positivist approach is incomplete (Guba and Lincoln, 1989). The positivist approach assumes that there is one objective reality—that this reality is something one can observe and measure, and that groups of observers can agree on its existence (Neuman, 2000). Positivist theory locates knowledge within the domain of absolute certainty so that uncertainty about a claim renders it disproved (Polkinghorne, 1983). Thus, positivist theory is necessarily limited to only criterion or experience that can claim certainty.

On the contrary, constructivist theory does not present a unified view of the world. Science becomes, according to Polkinghorne (1983), a search to gain deeper understanding and meaning. To this end, meaning cannot be described as valid, true or objective. One singular truth or universal interpretation does not exist. There may be useful, rewarding, or helpful interpretations, but no singular truth (Moustakas, 1994). Human beings construct and interpret their reality and, as such, researchers need a way to gain access to these varying perceptions. Constructivist theoretical frameworks and methods provide this access.

Guba and Lincoln (as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 98) considered the following as the primary assumptions of constructivism:

1. "Truth" is a matter of consensus among informed and sophisticated constructors, not of correspondence with objective reality

2. Facts have no meaning except within some values framework, hence there cannot be "objective assessment" of any proposition
3. "Causes" and effects do not exist except by imputation
4. Phenomena can only be understood within the context in which they are studied; findings from one context cannot be generalized to another; neither problems nor solutions can be generalized from one setting to another, and
5. Data derived from constructivist inquiry have neither special status nor legitimation; they represent simply another construction to be taken into account in the move toward consensus.

Similarly, Phillip Candy (as cited in Mezirow, 1991, p.xiii) expanded Guba and Lincoln's assumptions with the following principles:

1. People participate in the construction of reality
2. Construction occurs within a context that influences people
3. Construction is a constant activity that focuses on change and novelty rather than fixed conditions
4. Commonly accepted categories or understandings are socially constructed, not derived from observation
5. Given forms of understanding depend on the vicissitudes of social processes, not on the empirical validity of the perspective
6. Forms of negotiated understanding are integrally connected with other human activities
7. The "subjects" of research should be considered as "knowing" beings



8. Locus of control resides within the subjects themselves, and complex behavior is constructed purposefully
9. Human beings can attend to complex communications and organize complexity rapidly, and
10. Human interactions are based on intricate social roles, the rules governing which are often implicit.

Together, these assumptions and principles provided a framework that is especially applicable in research on job displacement and retraining. Individuals' experiences may vary according to sex, age, race, marital status, and cultural values. Their life situations and ability to navigate the changes wrought by job displacement may differ greatly. Constructivism allows for these differences and variations. More specifically, constructivist thought regards these differences as the essence of truth.

### **Phenomenology**

As an application of constructivism, phenomenology is a theoretical perspective appropriate to the study of displaced workers' experiences. Moustakas (1994) purported that the aim of phenomenology is to "...determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it (p. 13). This type of approach requires the researcher to enter the study without preconceptions about the phenomenon under study. In addition, the researcher must be open to the experiences as described by the respondents. The researcher may use questions

to guide the respondents to elicit thoughts, emotions, or ideas that surround the phenomena, and derive findings that may provide a basis for further study (Moustakas).

As previously mentioned, positivistic approaches maintain the "rightness" of a particular truth or object. The phenomenological approach, given its constructionist foundation, looks for truth in the subjective experience of individuals. According to Patton (2002), "There is no separate (or objective) reality for people. There is only what they know their experience is and means" (p. 106). A positivistic methodology looks to the nature of unquestionable truth and objectivity. Phenomenology looks to the truth in the subjective experiences of respondents. Use of the phenomenological approach to develop the research questions in this study provided access to the following: how the respondents relate to the experiences; how each is aware of the situation; how the phenomenon is understood; what the phenomenon means; and, how each respondent values the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). By relying on "...descriptions of what people experience and how it is they experience what they experience" (Patton, 2002, p. 107), the researcher may begin to understand how the individual respondents put the pieces together "...in such a way as to make sense of the world, and in so doing, develop a worldview" (p. 106).

### **Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory**

Mezirow's (1991) transformative theory of adult learning is solidly grounded in constructivist theory and the phenomenological perspective. It looks closely at

meaning by considering "...how it is construed, validated, and reformulated-and the social conditions that influence the ways in which adults make meaning of their experience" (p. xii). Like cognitive psychology, it also suggests that peoples' behaviors, actions and thoughts *are* predicated on how they interpret what happens to them, not by the actual events themselves (Mezirow). In keeping with a constructivist tradition, transformative learning theory promotes the idea that human beings do not discover knowledge as much as they construct it (Schwandt, 2001). Humans interpret events through their social interactions, language, and shared experiences, not in isolation. These interpretations are fluid and changing depending on the conceptual framework held by the individual. As opposed to the positivist stance of certitude and exactness, constructivist theory allows for the multiple interpretations held in Mezirow's theory.

Mezirow (1991, 1995) suggested meaning is constructed in a fairly specific way. There are two parts of meaning structure: meaning schemes and meaning perspectives. Meaning schemes are the specific beliefs, emotion reactions, and feelings that make up interpretations of experiences. Critical reflection is required to change one's meaning schemes. If a meaning scheme is fundamentally changed, a perspective transformation may occur. Mezirow was careful to point out that meaning schemes may change and learning take place, but that learning may not be transformative. It is only when meaning perspectives change, that transformative learning occurs. Generally, this is the result of a disorienting dilemma, triggered by a major life change or crisis.

Ten stages or phases comprise Mezirow's (1991) explanation of perspective transformation. The first stage begins with a disorienting dilemma (in this case the loss of a job) and ends with the reintegration of the new meaning perspective into one's life. The ten stages are:

1. A disorienting dilemma
2. Self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame
3. A critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions
6. Planning of a course of action
7. Acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one's plan
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships, and
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective. (Mezirow, 1991, pp. 168-169)

As described by Mezirow (1997), "...transformative learning occurs when individuals change their frames of reference (meaning schemes) by critically reflecting on their assumptions and beliefs and consciously making and implementing plans that bring about new ways of defining their experiences" (p. 6). This statement emphasizes the constructivist assumptions that underlie Mezirow's theory. Furthermore, Mezirow believed his theory supports "... a conviction that meaning exists within ourselves rather in external forms...and that the personal meanings that we attribute to our experiences are acquired and validated through human interaction and communication" (1991, p. xiv).

Mezirow's transformative learning theory enables the researcher to look at the experiences through the lens of adult learning theory. First, one considers how

the expectations, influenced by cultural assumptions and presuppositions, work to make the meaning individuals derive from their experiences. Individuals make meaning and then seek to validate that meaning. Second, when faced with a disorienting dilemma, people are challenged to reformulate the meaning of the experience. Individuals may not be cognizant of the exact process and some may arrive at the point of integration (Mezirow's final stage) by seeming happenstance. Finally, Mezirow is clear that individuals will not reach this stage without critical reflection.

### **Participants**

Purposive sampling was used for this study. A purposive sampling technique seeks information rich cases or respondents. It operates on the assumption that "...one wants to discover, gain insights; therefore, one needs to select a sample from which one can learn the most" (Merriam, 1988, p. 48). To further define purposive sampling, this study also employed criterion sampling as each respondent was required to meet the criterion of experiencing the same phenomenon (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Each participant was a displaced manufacturing worker (either sex, any age) who entered a retraining or graduated from a retraining program at a community college after involuntary displacement from a job in a manufacturing setting. Further, each participant was displaced from an hourly position (e.g. production) as opposed to a salaried position (e.g. management). As described by the federal government, displaced workers are defined as persons 20 years of age and older who lost or left jobs because a plant or

company closed or moved, there was insufficient work for them to do, or their position was abolished (*Worker Displacement during the late 1990s*, 2000b). This job loss may have been the result of downsizing, off-shoring, production line shut down or plant closing. For the purpose of this study, individuals who accepted voluntary separation through early retirement or incentive packages were excluded from participation. Since the goal of this study was to explore a *specific* phenomenon, the researcher limited the criterion of job loss to involuntary job loss.

According to several sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002; Moustakas, 1994), there is no specific rule to determine sample size for a qualitative study. According to Patton (2002), "...the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytic capabilities of the researcher than with sample size" (p. 245). Furthermore, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that sampling should continue to the point of redundancy. "If the purpose is to maximize information, then sampling is terminated when no new information is forthcoming from the newly sampled units; thus *redundancy*...is the primary criterion" (p. 202).

Six participants were interviewed. Again, all participants were hourly employees as opposed to salaried employees. Each was displaced from a manufacturing setting and had entered or graduated from a retraining program at a community college between May 2003 and May 2008. It was important to interview participants who were fairly close to the experiences of both displacement and retraining, assuming that their feelings, memories, and concerns would be more easily recalled and vivid. Information about this critical period of

time and events were essential to understanding how the participants made sense of this major transition in their lives.

A survey was conducted in 2007 by this researcher to learn more about displaced workers' experiences with support services immediately upon their displacement. In cooperation with a local workforce development center, over 671 recently displaced manufacturing workers received the survey. These 671 recipients were identified through a stratified random sample (alphabetical order, every second name) from a pool of 1,344 individuals identified as eligible for TAA benefits. A total of 51 surveys (7.6%) were returned. In addition to the survey, respondents were invited to share more of their experiences through an individual, face-to-face meeting. If respondents accepted the invitation to meet with this researcher in person, they were asked to provide their contact information. There was one stipulation: plans for retraining must be at the community college level (within the timeframe previously mentioned). Given the small size and limited program offerings on the campus where I serve as provost, several potential respondents may start a program of retraining on the local campus and then matriculate to other campuses for program completion. These individuals were also considered as potential respondents. Each of the individuals who were selected as participants was either unknown to me or known to me by name only.

A letter was sent to those who provided contact information that outlined the purpose of the study, time commitment, and general expectations along with directions on how to contact me. This letter was sent to 23 of the 57 individuals

who submitted the original survey. Out of the 23 who received the letter, eleven individuals contacted me. Follow-up phone calls were made to establish a meeting time, at the respondents' convenience, to determine willingness to participate in the study. Of the eleven who contacted me, one person failed to return my phone calls. Another of the eleven respondents decided not to participate at that point.

I then met individually with these nine potential participants. Final selection of respondents to participate in the study was made based upon their interest and my assessment of their willingness to share their experiences with me. A standard informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study and what was expected of the participants, and a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity was signed and collected from each of the seven respondents, now participants. Sufficient time was given to the participants to review and sign the consent form. At that point, efforts were made to answer questions and clear up confusion. The selected participants were given pseudonyms. These pseudonyms were used throughout the data collection stage and in the final document. All interviews were tape recorded. The recordings will be destroyed at the end of the study. One of the participants moved to another state prior to our first tape-recorded session and was dropped from the study.

### **Interviews**

To gain insight into the participants' lives, it was important to design the study in such a way as to enable the researcher to access information about their



thoughts, feelings, hopes, fears, and frustrations. Narrative inquiry, through an interview format, allowed this type of information collection. Given the constructivist nature of this study, the researcher attempted to capture the differing perceptions among participants through open-ended questioning.

Bogdan and Bilken (2003) described the interview process as "...a purposeful conversation directed by one in order to get information from the other" (p. 93). They were careful to assert that the researcher must exercise caution to not control the interview too rigidly. An interview that does not allow a respondent access to his/her voice would "...fall out of the qualitative range" (p. 94). To that end, a semi-structured interview format was used, one which allowed for rich descriptive data to emerge but also afforded the researcher a degree of continuity among respondents. According to Bogden and Bilken, the goal of the interview process is to reveal if and how the respondents' perspectives yield insight, not collect answers to a list of questions. Advantages of the interview guide were its contribution to managing time and keeping the researcher focused.

The interviews were modeled on Seidman's (2006) three-interview series format, with the goal of questioning until "...a good, rich and credible" answer to the research question is found (p. ix). I discovered after the first two interviews, that my participants found the three-interview format to be burdensome. As fulltime students with families and other commitments, their stress levels were uniformly high. In addition, they realized that the amount of time needed to conduct three interviews was simply more than they had available. According to Seidman (1988), "As long as the structure is maintained that allows the participants to reconstruct

and reflect upon their experiences within the context of their lives, alterations to the three-interview structure can certainly be explored” (p. 15). Thus, I conducted two interviews with two of the participants and one lengthy interview with the remaining four candidates. The interviews each lasted between sixty and 100 minutes, with two interviews lasting two hours. A copy of the interview guide used in this study appears in the appendix.

The critical criteria with the interview process remained: sufficiency and saturation of information (Seidman, 1998). The first criterion, sufficiency, asks, “Are there sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants and sites of the population so that others outside the sample might connect to the experiences of those in it?” (p. 48). In this study, six individuals of different ages, genders, and educational backgrounds were interviewed. The participants were displaced from four very different manufacturing companies and attended three different community colleges.

Seidman’s (1988) second criterion, saturation of information, refers to “...that point in the study at which the interviewer begins to hear the same information reported” (p.4 8). By the time I had interviewed the fifth participant, I was hearing much the same information. At the end of the sixth interview, I determined that I was no longer acquiring new information.

Prior to conducting the research with human subjects, the organizational plan of the study was submitted to the Institutional Review Board at Iowa State University for review and approval. All interviews were conducted at a public location

convenient to the respondent. The contents of each interview were tape-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The purpose of the interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories. (Patton, 2002, p. 341)

### **Trustworthiness**

Due to the nature of qualitative research, issues of reliability and validity are generally not as easily identified as in positivistic inquiry (Merriain, 1988). Positivistic inquiry, frequently through quantitative methods, seeks objectivity by controlling variables, minimizing the role of the researcher, and maximizing consistency for the purpose of replication (Owens, 1987). Qualitative inquiry affords different assumptions about truth and therefore requires different efficacy techniques. Lincoln and Guba (1985) offered several such techniques to establish credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These techniques include: prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, negative case analysis, triangulation, referential adequacy, persistent observation, and member checking.

Member checks were used throughout the data collection and analysis processes. After each tape recorded session was transcribed and analyzed, the researcher checked with each participant to ensure that the information and interpretations were accurate and reflected his or her thoughts and feelings. Each participant received the verbatim transcript for review. This provided an opportunity to ask clarifying questions if ambiguities in participant statements

were encountered. Peer debriefing was provided by the researcher's faculty committee members as well as graduate student colleagues. Both faculty committee members and student colleagues were aware of qualitative research practices yet were not directly involved with this particular research. Throughout the research process, I maintained a journal and interview notes as recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985). This provides a method whereby the researcher is able "...to record a variety of information about the *self* and *method*" (p. 327). The interview notes were especially helpful when I listened to the tape-recorded interviews and read the transcriptions afterwards. Being able to include my personal notes, which reflected my impressions of the participants' body language, facial expressions, and mannerisms, added to the richness of the data.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study relate to its qualitative methodological framework. Since an interview format was used, all findings were based on self-reported data. Although the assumption was made that respondents were honest, it is possible that inaccurate or false information may have been provided. According to Patton (2002), data secured through interviews may be distorted due to "...personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics, and simple lack of awareness since interviews can be greatly affected by the emotional state of the interviewee at the time of the interview" (p. 306). In addition, the interview process relied heavily on the skills of the individuals chosen to articulate their thoughts and feelings.

This was a qualitative study of a limited number of participants at three particular community colleges. Different findings might arise from another group of participants. As such, no generalizations may be made to other populations.

The delimitations of this study were the number and type of respondents, the place, and the timeframe. The participants were selected through purposive sampling. They were all displaced workers who chose to retrain in a community college setting. I interviewed six participants, all Caucasian, who had either completed or were completing their retraining program. These participants were all successful in their retraining programs. Interviewing displaced manufacturing workers who did not successfully complete their retraining programs may yield different results. The place was limited by my ability to identify displaced workers. As such, the geographic area was very specific to a primarily rural region in one mid-western state.

## **CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF EACH THEME**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn more about the experiences of displaced manufacturing workers as they lose jobs and retrain in a community college setting. Through individual informal interviews, six participants shared their experiences as they answered a series of questions developed to elicit their memories and thoughts. Using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to check for theme evolution and Mezirow's Transformative Learning model (Mezirow, 1991, 1995) to better understand the experiences as described by the participants, the conversations with the participants were analyzed.

At the beginning of the interviews the participants provided demographic information. This information is briefly summarized below. Three women and three men agreed to meet with me in an informal setting. Many of the interviews were held on the community college campus where I work. Since all of the participants had attended various community colleges, they were comfortable in this environment. The other interviews were conducted in private rooms at local restaurants convenient to the participants. The informality of the settings and interview process allowed the participants to relax and, by their own admission, actually enjoy our conversations. Many individuals were able to recall specific moments of their experiences with great emotion. Each individual was mailed a copy of their transcript to ensure that not only did they feel comfortable with the recorded conversation but that our dialogue accurately reflected their reactions to displacement and their experiences with retraining. No participants contacted me offering corrections or

clarification. Through these private, individual, and informal interviews, the participants shared their unique experiences with me; their own sense of the events that had transpired, the importance of the job loss, their decision-making process to return to training, and their experiences while enrolled in retraining.

The analyses of the conversations is divided into two sections in this chapter. First, a demographic overview is provided. Following the demographic information is a description of the themes that emerged using Lincoln and Guba's (1985) constant comparative methodology and Mezirow's Transformational Learning theory. Through this method the following themes emerged: *Absence of support for post-secondary education, fear of failure, development of coping strategies, the role of critical relationships, and self-perception change.*

### **Demographic Overview**

As planned, I interviewed six individuals who were displaced from manufacturing employment. Their jobs were lost because of plant closure, relocation, or downsizing due to foreign competition. Each of these individuals opted to enter a retraining program in a community college setting. While enrolled in training, each participant received full funding for their tuition, fees, related materials and supplies, and textbooks through the Trade Adjustment Assistance Act.

The participants came from four different manufacturing companies. These companies ranged in size from over 4,000 employees to fewer than 100 employees. Two companies were bought out by other entities resulting in complete plant closures. One company shifted its remaining workers to another state. The

remaining company continues to produce manufactured goods with a significantly reduced workforce. Three of the four companies were long-standing in the communities in which they were located. One company had been in business for over 100 years; two others for decades. Thus, it wasn't unusual for several generations of family members to have been employed by the same company.

The participants ranged in age from 42 to 58 years old. Three women and three men were interviewed. All participants were Caucasian living in primarily rural areas. Each of the participants was either married or in a long-standing committed relationship. Five of the six participants also had children or step children and sometimes, grandchildren. Further, three participants had at one time been single parents.

Four of the six participants graduated high school. Two participants completed a GED; one while part of her retraining post-displacement. Two of the six participants had completed at least one course at the community college level prior to their displacement. Five of the participants came from working class families or parents who held blue collar jobs. The sixth participant's father was disabled and unable to work. Many of the mothers were homemakers. Some of the mothers eventually sought employment outside the home in a blue collar or service sector job. Generally, all participants felt that there was little or no parental support for continuing their education past high school. Only one of the participants mentioned fleeting thoughts of college after high school graduation; the other five stated emphatically that they never planned to attend school again.



All of the participants had worked in other employment sectors beyond manufacturing. These included retail sales, customer service, daycare, financial services, secretarial, and fast food. However, their longest work tenure was in the manufacturing sector. Each person mentioned pay and benefits as the primary reasons why they sought manufacturing employment. Most believed that their manufacturing jobs would result in job security or as one person claimed, *“a job you could die with.”* Participants indicated that they guessed or knew *“the end was in sight”* as far as employment in the manufacturing sector was concerned. Even though many of them believed that they felt ready for it, when the end finally came, it was still a blow. As one said, *“Losing a job is never easy, especially when you know you’ll never make that pay and benefits again.”*

### **Introduction to Each Participant**

#### **Janet**

Janet entered the room with a bright smile and did not stop smiling throughout the interview, even through tears at one point. She is a 52-year-old female with three grown children, all currently attending college. A trained engineer, Janet’s husband was also displaced from a manufacturing job. Her family went through quite a bit of change with both wage earners transitioning into new employment. Janet had worked several other jobs, both full and part-time, prior to her manufacturing job. She did not seriously consider post-secondary education until her displacement. As she stated, when she graduated from high school *“...you either got married or went to work. So, I went to work.”* She had a similar no nonsense approach to returning to

school, to successfully completing her retraining, and to securing her first post-retraining job. Janet indicated that she would have happily stayed in the manufacturing sector until her retirement. She liked the job she was doing and appreciated the pay and benefits. Once the end came, however, Janet was very excited about the possibility of going to school and earning a degree. She brightened as she talked about her decision-making process to determine what to study, the excitement and fear of the first day of school, and the gratification of academic success. Given the assistance available to help her attend school, she believed that it really didn't make sense to do anything else. Further, she realized that *"...an opportunity like this comes along once in a life time and that's only if you are very, very lucky."*

### **Charley**

Charley is a 48-year-old male who, at the time of our interview, was still looking for employment after completing his retraining program. He was thoughtful about his experience of losing a job and also very hopeful about his future. With the most experience in the manufacturing sector of my six participants, almost 28 years, Charley found the past few years to be disconcerting and *"one of the hardest things"* he had ever done. That said, he was also able to fully embrace the opportunity to go to school, his face relaxing and voice quickening as he talked about his first semester of classes. Charley became very emotional during our interview. At one point he asked that the tape be turned off, tears spilling from his eyes. He quietly excused himself and returned to the room after a few minutes. I asked if he would

like to stop to which he replied, *“Absolutely not! I am here to do a job.”* That sense of getting the job done was one I felt from the other participants not only as they approached the interviews but as they talked about returning to school. Once back from the quick break, Charley, without prompting, offered that he really wasn’t sad at all to see his factory employment end. Many people were devastated but he was not among them. He truly believed he was, again, presented with *“the opportunity of a lifetime”* and he was ready to begin it. By this time, the tears were long gone and his face was relaxed and smiling. Charley admitted that the only thing he missed about the factory employment was the sense of security that he thought he had. Sometimes, he said, *“I might get a little sad that there is no job safety [security] anymore.”*

## **Lois**

At 48 years old, Lois entered the room with a nervous look and laugh. She seemed a bit uneasy as we began our interview but loosened up a great deal as she began to talk. In fact, during the course of our conversation, Lois disclosed several highly personal anecdotes about her life; many of them, as she stated, painful or embarrassing to her. She had experienced several of those difficult and tragic life experiences that take their toll both physically and emotionally. To me she embodied the adage of wisdom distilled through sorrow. In spite of her challenges, Lois remained optimistic about her future and committed to *“giving back”* and serving others. Although not encouraged by her family to continue her education after high school, Lois did receive positive feedback from others outside of her family. She was

enrolled in a special program in high school and never forgot that one of her counselors told her that she should go to college. Years later, after being displaced from her manufacturing employment, those words of encouragement proved to be very important her. She said, *“...people never really know how they might positively impact you. We should encourage each other when we can, ‘cause you just never know.”* Of all of the participants, Lois became the most emotional about losing her job, crying openly and often. Usually, the participants would apologize for becoming emotional during the course of our interviews but not Lois. She had supported her children through an abusive marriage and then as a single parent. She had lost a son in a tragic accident. Through all of these experiences she said that she *“...learned the power of tears.”* The loss of the *“job she planned to retire on”* was a significant and painful blow to her; one she admitted that she was *“still recovering from.”* She then quickly added, *“...but it is still a good thing.”*

## **Tim**

At 42-years-old, Tim was the youngest of the participants. Tim thought seriously about attending college when he graduated from high school and became even more amenable to post-secondary education as his years in the factory went by. Although he enjoyed his 20 years in manufacturing, especially the physical labor, he was not upset to see it end. In fact, he talked about the number of times he considered quitting his job and returning to school because he believed that he *“could do better than a factory job.”* At one point in his factory career, he did sign up (and complete) a couple of business courses at a community college. He found the

demands of being a full time employee, part-time student, and family man to be a difficult juggling act. Tim admitted that he struggled with which degree or program to pursue as his retraining opportunity. In fact, he changed his mind mid-course and wasn't able to complete his program within the approved TAA timeframe. Tim then applied for financial aid to complete an associate degree. At the time of our interview, he was about to enroll in a private four-year college to complete a bachelor degree. This is something that he *"...never in ten million years"* thought he would do.

### **Sam**

A 54-year-old female, Sam seemed anxious to share her story. She walked in with purpose, greeted me, and began talking. Her energy matched the expansive list of jobs held and life experiences she shared with me. Sam grew up in an abusive home environment and spent time in the foster care system. She found her teen-age years to be a time of chaos and pain. All she wanted out of high school was to get *"get the expletive out."* In fact, she left high school and entered a GED program to no avail. She eventually completed her GED after her displacement. Sam has three children, eight grandchildren and had, at one point, been a single parent caring for both children and grandchildren. She was married at the time of our interview. Sam did not consider college for *"one second, ever."* Although she had many jobs, it was during her time as a single parent that Sam began her employment in a manufacturing setting. As is consistent with so many others, the opportunity for a good wage, good benefits, and job security was too much to pass up.

## Ralph

Ralph was the oldest participant at 58 years old. He seemed somewhat reluctant about the entire interview process and, at one point, I wondered if he might withdraw from the study. I asked him at opportune times if he was OK or if he wanted to continue. He always affirmed that he did want to continue adding that he felt that he had an obligation to try to help others. At the end of the process and in response to his reading of the transcribed interview, he was rather surprised at “...all I had to say and it was really sort of OK.” This was high praise from Ralph. As true of most participants, Ralph went to work right after he graduated from high school because “*that’s just what you did.*” He did not consider furthering his education nor was such a course of action even a point of discussion. Not wanting to work for the “local” factory, Ralph pursued a couple of careers right after high school and prior to entering the factory. Always handy with tools, he worked for a brother in the brother’s automotive collision repair shop for several years. He then worked for a local city street department maintaining and repairing equipment. Eventually, he decided that working for the factory offered the best salary and benefits as well as job security. At the time of his displacement, he had worked for 26 years in the factory; the same one from which his father and grandfather had retired. Ralph’s overwhelming feelings were anger and fear at being displaced. As he said, “*You work your whole expletive life doin’ what you’re supposed to do, providing for your family, working hard, and this is what you get.*” Of all of the participants, it seemed the most difficult for him to stay on track with my interview questions. When he tried to answer questions he often ended up talking about why this all happened,

corporate greed, what's wrong with America and how things used to be. Although he did complete a retraining program and is working in his chosen field, he stated that he would *"never trust another employer as long as I live."*

### **Data Analysis**

After each interview, I listened to the tape and read through my interview notes. I then sent the tape to an experienced, confidential transcriptionist. After each transcription was completed and the tape returned to me, I reviewed the transcription as I listened to the tape to ensure accuracy of the transcription. Then I began open coding, "...working intensively with the data, line by line" (Esterberg, 2002, p. 158). As I read each transcription several times, I began making notes in the margins. Each participant was assigned a color and his/her transcription was printed only on that color of paper. Therefore, when I began to organize the information into themes, the quotes were easily identified based upon the color of paper. Using Moustakas' (1994) method of organizing phenomenological data, I coded and analyzed the data. As I considered the data, I began placing them into "invariant meaning units and themes" (p. 122). At this point, all data were considered equal. Through this process, the emerging themes eventually led to my interpretation and findings.

#### **Theme 1: Absence of support to pursue post-secondary education**

In addition to the usual trepidation that one might feel when considering a return to school, all but one of the participants indicated that they had never seriously entertained the thought of returning to school until their displacement.

Further, all but one said that they were never encouraged by their family of origin to do so. This is consistent with Fishbein and Ajzen's (1975) attitude-behavior theory. This theory suggested that one's attitudes about education are established by those people who are important to them; primarily the family. Three of the participants spoke very openly about how their family of origin influenced their thoughts about post-secondary education. Ralph stated emphatically that in his family people went out and *"...got good, honest jobs and worked hard. Only people who were afraid of hard work went to school."* He found that early influence to be a sticking point for him when he considered his options post-displacement. Later, when he had decided to begin his retraining program, he reported that his mother still said to him, *"...are you sure you want to do this college thing, you could probably get another job somewhere."*

In the same vein, Sam indicated that when she was in high school she had no support to continue her education:

*The thought of going to more school was not on my radar. It was never discussed between me and my parents. Never. Period. The words never came up. In my family you just went to work. You got a job that would provide a decent salary and some benefits. You bought a house and took care of your kids. We thought that more than a high school education was sort of a waste of time. Not one person in my family ever had gone to more than high school. Sometimes they still give me crap about it, too.*

In addition to the sentiment that going to college wasn't necessary, several of the participants were actually discouraged to consider it because *it would be too hard for them*. Comments made by family members decades ago still affected them. As Charley said, *"...I remember my Dad telling me I was too dumb to go to college and that I would get more miles out of my back than my brain."* Even though Tim



thought about college and was a pretty good high school student, he didn't think he could buck his family. He remembered very clearly, and with some emotion, a conversation *"about life after high school"* that he had with his mother. He stated that, *"She told me that our folks didn't really go to college. That it would be too hard for me if I went to college and then just failed."* Tim told me that at that point, he just gave up on the idea. He planned to go to work in the factory and save money on his own to go to college. Then, as Tim stated, *"...life just starts going and you have a family and a house and you're buying things and you think that this isn't so bad."* However, Tim was also the only participant who stated emphatically that he had really wanted to go to college and always knew he would. As he said, *"I always liked school, even in high school. I wish I'd done it sooner [post-secondary education] and if I had money and didn't need to work I would go to school full-time all of the time."*

## **Theme 2: Fear of failure**

This theme seemed to resonate most strongly with the participants. The participants were very vocal about their experience of returning to school and had a great deal to say about it. Many showed emotion with tears and cracked voices which frequently resulted in a flood of words. At times, it was difficult for me, as an interviewer, to ask clarifying questions due to their verbosity.

The fear of failure manifested itself in many ways; fear of embarrassment, fear of being an outsider, fear of letting family members down, fear of displeasing others, fear of being alone. Upon returning to school, the participants faced many of the same barriers as do other returning adult students. The most emotional and

frequently cited was simply the fear of failing. *“Falling short”* as Ralph said. The participants each shared several examples of how they experienced that fear and also how they attempted to manage it.

To begin with, participants often felt fear about their next steps. More specifically, fear about making the “right” decision when selecting a retraining program. So many of the participants came to look at their displacement as an opportunity (some more readily than others) and they simply did not want to “mess up” this “once in a lifetime” chance. As Ralph said, *“I got one shot at doing something else because I was old when the plant closed down. I didn’t want to blow it.”* Other participants talked about the stress they felt when making their retraining decision. Sam indicated that she sometimes worried more about *“meeting all of the retraining rules and guidelines”* than she did about whether or not she might like the career. Tim stated that sometimes he felt overwhelmed with all of the decisions that had to be made, in his case, in relatively short order. He said, *“the only reservation I had was that I didn’t know what I was going to go to school for because there were a lot of hoops to jump through. It had to be an approved training, an approved career. It had to have growth potential. I only had one shot at this and I wanted to use it.”*

Sam began her conversation about what it was like to come back to school after a few decades with *“Like what the expletive am I doing here? Because, Mary, I was not that good of a student. You know I passed OK elementary years but then went to ten different schools because my Dad was in the military.”* Others reported similar first day jitters. Ralph indicated that the first time he went to a community college campus to get information he didn’t even get out of his car. The fear of

failing, combined with a lack of academic confidence seemed to cripple him. As he said:

*I was nervous all morning before I went there. Had about 5 cups of coffee. I just remember that when I pulled into the parking lot and looked at the building, I just couldn't do it. I always sucked as a student and was always in the slow group. My parents told me I was lazy and dumb. All I could think was, what the expletive do I think I am doing here. Then I just thought that I am a failure. I lost my job and I'm too old to go to school.*

Janet had a similar experience. Her face filled with emotion as she described how, on the first day of school, she walked right through the front doors and straight into the first restroom she could find. Once there, she promptly burst into tears. Lois stated that she too found the days leading up to and first few days of retraining to be very emotional for her because she “...*didn't want to blow it.*”

As with the others, Tim also talked about his “*concerns*” about returning to school. He was careful not to use the word *fear*. He determined that he had certain “*concerns*” about returning and only a little fear. His biggest concern was in being able to keep up with all of the coursework. Going from not being a student for over 20 years to becoming a full-time student overnight filled him with some trepidation but also, as he was very quick to point out, excitement.

Another sub-theme of the participants' fear was the age factor. They all talked about their age, especially how long it had been since they were in school, any school. Two of the participants had taken at least one community college class prior to their displacement; sometimes successfully, sometimes not. Even Charley, who had successfully completed some community college coursework prior to displacement, discussed his fear, stating:

*“You’re not used to using your mind all the time. You’re used to doing some mundane task over and over again and you’re not doing a lot of thinking; that kind of thinking anyway. So, I was apprehensive and I was afraid that wouldn’t make the cut and the kids would be smarter than me and faster than me and I think that is true. They are a lot more technological. They grew up with it and I didn’t.”*

Sam indicated that one of her big fears was that, as she said, *“I am too old and tired to learn.”* She then added, *“I remember the first time I was sitting in a college class and it’s like you’re still in high school? You’re only 17? You’re only 16? Oh, my god. You’re so young and smart. It was just weird to be sitting and there and over 50 years old. It made wonder if my brain would still work.”*

Lois shared a story from her Sociology class:

*...we were doing a culture experience-thing. Like how things change and then sort of really don’t all that much. It was sort of a fun exercise during the first week of class. The instructor set it up as a trivia thing based on different generations of students. Like Boomers or Gen Xers. So, she is going through all of this stuff and everything from the 50s, 60s, and 70s, I know. After awhile it just got to be a joke. If the kids didn’t know it, they just looked to me. At first it made me really embarrassed because I was so old. But after awhile I thought that being old, I know some things the kids don’t. And that is important. Sometimes, I really had to work to remember that, though.*

### **Theme 3: Development of coping strategies**

Given the degree to which work influences other aspects of our lives, it is no surprise that losing a job may be a highly traumatic event (Daniels et al., 2000).

Research indicates that normal coping skills are often upended (Daniels et al.). As each of the participants dealt with their job loss and began making decisions regarding their next steps, a new theme emerged, coping. More specifically, coping was accomplished by regarding school as a new job. By developing this coping

strategy the participants were able to exercise some control over their new situation and environment. Several participants used those exact words. Ralph disclosed, in a very serious manner, *“...I was so scared of flunking and being a loser that I decided to make school my new job. I had to pretend that it was my job and I wasn’t going to lose this job for nothin’.”* Another participant, Tim, stated:

*...people did give me a lot of joking around. I guess you could say about how much time or basically how I live in the computer lab. I have my own space rented there but that’s not hard for me because when I worked at Company X I was the guy that always volunteered for overtime. I’m used to working long hours and it’s not a big deal for me.*

Janet declared, *“When I came to school I looked at it like it was my job.”* She also talked about the responsibility she felt towards her children which contributed to her “job-like” approach. *“My kids were in college, too, and I needed, I’d always said, set the expectations, so how could I not set a good example?”*

Feeling that strong association between school and work helped Lois deal with some of her fears. She indicated that regarding school as a job helped her believe that she could handle it. *“After all,”* she said, *“I never lost a job because I couldn’t do it. I lost a job because it went to Mexico. It’s really easy if you just say school is my life.”* At a later point in the interview, Lois came back to this idea, stating:

*...I thought about school as my job because then it wasn’t nearly as scary for me. I thought I will just go to school every day and really be there every day. Just like I would do at work. If I skipped class, it would just be like skipping a day of work. You could get fired for doing that. Homework was like learning a new job thing. On the job, you were expected to, you know, just do it or learn how to do it. I sort of thought that’s what I should do at school.*

Similarly, Janet said, *“like I said, it was a job for me you know. I didn’t have another job so all of my energy was focused on school. When I did it that way I starting getting less scared that I would flunk out.”*

Finally, one participant, Charley, reported feeling less fear about the academic part as much as the logistics of it all; how to balance all of life’s demands. As he stated, *“I was worried about figuring it all out. How do you go to school, do all of the homework, support your family? I wanted to give everything the right amount of time.”* Once Charley got into the swing of things he thought school became *“...like going to work every day.”*

#### **Theme 4: Critical relationships**

Each of the participants in this study talked about the importance of relationships. At various times the relationships provided different things to them: support, information, friendship, mentoring, or guidance. They used many descriptors when speaking about these relationships; all of them strongly associated with the literature on successful retention practices in community college settings (Johnson, 1997; Tinto, 1975; Tinto, 1993, 2000). Each participant was also very clear about the role that the *relationship* played in his or her life while in school.

Tinto’s model of student retention specifically lists academic and social integration as a strong predictor of student persistence. He suggested that “connections” with other students and the college community itself are critical. That “connection” on campus may be anyone: an advisor, the custodian, an instructor, or the librarian. The role of that person on campus is not nearly as important as the

relationship itself. This was true of my participants as well. As Sam said, *“I give total praise to Debbie (pseudonym). She told me, I will take you under my wing, Sam, and I will get you through. If it wasn’t for her, I’ll tell you right now, she had a tremendous effect on me. I would just go to her whenever I was having a really bad day.”* Janet said something similar about her relationship with a student services employee, *“...but I always went in and I talked to Tina (pseudonym) and I was like what do you think and she’d, well, she would never say don’t take this class, but she would help me. Other times when I just didn’t know what to do, I knew Beverly (pseudonym) would just listen sometimes.”* Lois enjoyed a similar experience, too, with another student services employee. She mentioned that when *“...in doubt, I would always run it by Amy (pseudonym). It was just good to know someone cared.”*

Faculty members also proved to be a point of connection with the participants in this study. Several of them related stories that evinced the positive power and influence of the faculty-student relationship. Participants were sometimes pleasantly surprised by the care and compassion from their faculty members. Janet talked about her favorite professor, one who *“...you could just tell he really wanted you to learn it. He wanted you to ponder it. And because he did, we did.”*

Tim talked about a faculty member whom he felt had really gone out of his way to help him:

*I liked the personable-ness of the instructors. I mean you know, you go to a big school and there are 300 people in your class. You turn in your papers and they (faculty) don’t know you unless you make the effort. The instructors I dealt with on regular basis, they know you. I don’t know, maybe because they do know you that you don’t feel so much pressure. I don’t know but I felt comfortable in that small setting. I felt*

*like they sort of took care of us. They knew something about what we were trying to do and they cared.*

Ralph talked animatedly about the time when a faculty member dropped off an assignment to his home:

*I was really sick and I couldn't come to class, but I had really good attendance. To make things worse, our computer at home crashed so I had no way to get this big assignment. I was really freaked out about it, too. Then my instructor says, well, where do you live? If you are not too far away, she'll come by my house and drop off the assignment and the reading material for it. Who does that anymore? Man, I couldn't even believe it. It made me want to not let her down. I did real good in her class, too.*

Encouragement from faculty while enrolled in a challenging course was important. Sam said, *"Some of the instructors truly, truly cared about their students, their academic achievement and what they think they can get out of you. They're not going to let you fall to the waste-side. ...that made me step up my game plan."*

Charley mentioned the difference that an instructor made when she helped him through a composition class. He stated, *"I went through it and through it. She was very patient, very tolerant with me. I don't know if I would have made it through that English class. So having her on my side...I said thanks to her again when I saw her at my graduation."* Lois felt that the encouragement she received from an instructor in a science class was key to her completing the Nursing program:

*When he pulled me aside after that first test, I thought he was going to kick me out. I did I really poor job and it was all I could do not to burst into tears while we went over it. You know why he asked to see me after class? It wasn't because I was in trouble. It was because he could see that I was really upset and afraid. He was worried about me, not mad. He told me he would help me, that I could do it, that I could get a tutor. If he hadn't done that, I really don't know that I would have made it. I mean I probably would have finished school in something,*



*but not in what I really wanted to do. He is the reason that I am a nurse today.*

Attending school with other displaced workers was something that all of the participants mentioned. Most of the time they felt as though being around others who were going through what they were going through was a helpful, "...almost comforting" thing as Sam said. Janet was very clear that although "...we all had our own frustrations and doubts, you know we can do this and then when somebody would get down you'd say, Oh, c'mon. Maybe they would do the same for you or someone else you know." Other times, when a fellow displaced worker might get a bit dramatic in their frustration, again from Janet, "...we would just get a little stern. I said you **know** [her emphasis] you can do this. I have done this, I have been in your shoes and you just have to try not to get too shook up about it." Very simply, Tim said, "It's just nice to compare notes."

For others, just seeing fellow displaced workers was reassuring. The participants liked that they found others in the same boat. As Sam said, "...sitting at the front of classrooms because they were just like me. They wanted to hear what the teacher was saying. They wanted to shhhh the kids who were t-t-t on texting." Charley mentioned something similar when he talked about running into fellow former manufacturing workers while attending school, "It was just good to see them. It made you feel so not alone."

### **Theme 5: Perceptions of self-change/transformation**

The way the participants felt about themselves as learners, as workers, as people, changed dramatically over the course of their experience. Individuals were

emphatic and often quite emotional as they talked about the changes in their lives as a result of losing a job and then retraining. Given that so many of the participants did not believe they were “good students” or could be successful in a community college setting, their experiences were, as they described it, life changing.

With one exception, each participant described the loss of their job as frightening or disorienting. Although they believed that going back to school was the prudent and wise thing to do, most of them lacked the confidence that they could be successful. When they were then successful, it was often an epiphany of sorts for them. As Lois said, *“Being in school it just, it made me think that I am great as an individual.”* Janet indicated that the unexpected surprise was that she could do it and really well. As Ralph said, *“I just never thought I could do anything but work with my hands. I never thought I’d have to. It scared me, coming back to school. Then it sort of scared me for a minute, ‘cause I was sort of good at it.”*

The participants were in agreement that their experiences had ultimately been a good thing in their lives. As Janet said, *“It was probably one of the best things that happened to me. It made me find out what I was made of.”* Sam talked a lot about how she had changed through this experience and, at the end of it, was somehow different. She said, *“...you know, it’s funny, I feel more developed or...like I feel more whole.”* She, too, believed that losing the manufacturing job and returning to school was ultimately a good thing declaring *“I was the lucky one, I truly was the lucky one. If you would have told me I’d ever say that right after I lost my job, I would’ve told you, you were nuts.”* Tim indicated much the same when he shared how he felt about a certain stint he held while still employed in the manufacturing

sector. He was given the opportunity for a period of time to work as a training coordinator, off the factory floor. During that time his self-perception began to change and he likened that experience to the one of retraining after he was displaced. *“Honestly, I started changing how I viewed myself...I saw myself a lot different than when I had prior to that. Where before I saw myself as worker, somebody that had arms and legs that were used for moving parts around and stuff like that...then I had a lot more possibilities. It expanded my view of myself.”*

For others the knowledge that they were not “stupid” was life changing. As Todd said, *“Coming to school, I mean ...I said, hey, I can do this stuff, I am not stupid. I can do this. I am disciplined. I can do it. I enjoy it.”* Lois exclaimed, *“...maybe I’m not so smart but I’m smart enough. I’m teachable. Mary, If you can teach it, I can learn it. Guaranteed.”*

Another participant echoed that change and the impact it had already had in her life. Sam said, *“...because I am better than a factory worker. I am better than a fast-food person. If I’m not the smartest leaf on the tree, I am a very genuine and good person.”* And, finally, it seemed that Sam further summed it all up when she stated, *“What did I learn about myself? Now, I know I am a survivor.”*

Mezirow’s theory of transformative learning (1991) provides a framework with which to view the experiences of these participants. Each participant seemed to work their way through Mezirow’s ten stages of perspective transformation. Beginning with the disorienting dilemma of losing a job to the final stage of “reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by ones’ new perspective” (Mezirow, 1991. p. 169), the participants described themselves one

way as they entered college and, with one exception, “...*left college a different person.*” It was interesting to hear them discuss their journey. They often talked about how losing their job had “*rocked their world*” (Stage One: a disorienting dilemma) or made them think of themselves differently.

Initially, the majority of participants remembered feeling a sense of guilt or shame (Stage Two: self-examination with guilt or shame). They talked about feeling as though they had let their families down or how they should have been better prepared. As Ralph said, “...*I knew it was coming and I probably should have been readier for it.*”

Given that several of the participants were from families with long histories of working in the manufacturing sector, they found that their assumptions about jobs, work, what it means to take care of your family financially, or the potential value of education had to be re-evaluated (Stage Three: a critical assessment of epistemic, sociocultural, or psychic assumptions). A statement by Ralph clearly exemplifies this, “...*it was like I was a traitor or something. Then I decided that being a blue-collar worker at Company Y wasn’t a life sentence and I didn’t have to just be that.*” This also aligns with the second stage of Mezirow’s theory, self-examination with feelings of guilt or shame.

Stage Four of Mezirow’s theory is a recognition that one’s discontent and the process of transformation are shared and that others have negotiated a similar change. This stage was readily apparent with the study participants. Each of the participants stated that they often felt relief or buoyed by the proximity of others who

were going through the very same thing. Seeing others who were negotiating their way through the same experiences gave hope to each of them.

Through job search classes, career interest inventories, or networking, the majority sought ideas for a new career (Stage Five: exploration of options for new roles, relationships, and actions). One participant had a very solid plan even before he was displaced but the others all had to do some soul searching and research. In addition, family roles and relationships also appeared to shift. As Janet said, *“My family had to get used to the fact that I wasn’t going to take care of everything anymore. I had homework to do at night.”*

Planning a course of action was essential to each participant (Stage Six: planning a course of action). There was consensus that a well-designed course of action would help them to achieve their new goals. Furthermore, with new knowledge and greater confidence, each participant bloomed in their new role as successful college student (Stage Seven: acquisition of knowledge and skills for implementing one’s plan; State Eight: Provisional trying of new roles; and Nine: building of competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships).

Finally, each participant in this study believed that they had changed in a fundamental way over the course of their displacement, transition into college, time as a college student, or as a graduate (Stage Ten: reintegration into one’s life on the basis of conditions dictated by one’s new perspective). It was interesting to note how clearly the experiences of the participants paralleled this theory, more so than other adult learning theories. Although it is impossible to know for certain that individuals reached that culminating “reintegration stage” that Mezirow discusses (1991), his

theory of how individuals construct meaning would appear to have great utility when working with displaced manufacturing workers.

### Summary

Six displaced manufacturing workers were interviewed for this study. They were displaced from four different factories in a rural mid-western area. Each participant had chosen to attend a retraining program in a community college setting. The themes that emerged from the study include: *lack of support for post-secondary education from family of origin; fear of failure; developing coping strategies; the role of critical relationships; and perceptions of self-change*. As stated earlier, “There is no separate (or objective) reality for people. There is only what they know their experience is and what it means (Patton, 2002, p.106). It is through their experiences and what those experiences have meant to them, that I, as a researcher, have interpreted our conversations.

Each of the participants in my study readily expressed gratitude for the opportunity to return to school and retrain. Although frightened by the uncertainty ahead, they were all appreciative of the benefits available through the TAA. Without this assistance, not one participant believed that retraining would have been option. The imperative of money (mortgage, rent, groceries, or medical care) would have taken over and a new job, any job, would have been found. Since all of the participants had families of origin that did not support post-secondary education, their initial decision sometimes provoked derision or a lack of support. In spite of this, they all prevailed. As true with returning adult students, their initial fear of failure

was strong and palpable in the interviews even months after they had successfully completed their training. To counteract this fear, each of the participants developed a coping strategy; that of school as their new job. This seemed to help them have a “sense of control” as well as strengthen their focus and commitment to new goals. The importance of connection or engagement with community college personnel cannot be underestimated. Support and encouragement from faculty and/or staff helped to develop a sense of confidence and belonging about which the participants are still quite emotional. Further, the connection with each other, with other displaced workers, provided a life-line that seemed to sustain them. Finally, they all agreed that their sense of self had been changed through their experience of displacement and retraining. They each believed that they were better or stronger in some way and that their experience had, indeed, been a profound one.

The next chapter presents a summary of the study followed by the findings according to each research question. Implications for community colleges serving displaced manufacturing workers are presented as well as further research suggestions. The chapter concludes with my personal reflections.

## **CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSIONS AND OBSERVATIONS**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to learn more about the experiences of displaced manufacturing workers as they describe their job loss, transition into retraining programs, and complete the retraining. Research questions were used to guide the participants to discuss the factors that contributed to their success as well as hindered their success. Given the vast number of manufacturing workers already displaced, and high estimation of those yet to lose manufacturing jobs, as well as the unique structural shifts that have permanently eliminated these jobs, there is a critical need to serve this population well.

For the past seven years I have served as the Provost of a small satellite community college campus in a mid-sized town located in the rural mid-west. The major employer in this particular community, a Fortune 500 manufacturing company, was purchased by another entity during this time. From an estimated employment of 4,000 workers in 2003 to fewer than 50 in 2009, the impact of this loss was profound. Certified through the TAA, hundreds of displaced workers opted to enter a retraining program in a community college setting. Certainly some of these workers came to the local satellite campus where I work; however, due to the small campus size, very few full training programs are offered. Therefore, the majority of the displaced workers either attended larger sister campuses, other community colleges, or proprietary training institutions.

The faculty and staff on the campus where I worked, watched as the community dealt with the news of this particular plant closure. I realized that we



would be serving this population but did not imagine the unique challenges that would come with so many displaced manufacturing workers, now adult students, attending classes. Research on working with adult students abounds while research specifically related to displaced manufacturing workers as adult students was difficult to find. Listening to their stories and observing them as they worked their way through school sparked my interest in learning more about their experiences as displaced manufacturing workers retraining in community college settings. My hope was that a better understanding of those experiences may inform community college practice as well as contribute useful information to other service providers.

### **Findings Based on the Research Questions**

This section presents and discusses the findings as they relate to the primary research questions. Listening to the voices of the participants as they reflected on the meaning of their experiences enabled me to return to the original guiding questions with new information and insight.

#### ***Research Question 1: How do displaced manufacturing workers describe the services and programming available to them as they are displaced and then transition into retraining programs in a community college setting?***

As one participant said, *"You won't hear me say anything bad about community colleges."* Others expressed their satisfaction through words such as, *"...got what I needed, when I needed it"* or *"It was the best place for me to be."* Several participants expressed relief at being in a community college setting and not on a university or four-year college campus. The impression that they would sit in lecture halls *"with hundreds of students"* or would find themselves to be *"...the old*

*part in with 18-year-olds*” seemed too much to bear. Further, they were in agreement that when they had concerns or needed help, they knew where to go. They were emphatic that the academic support they received whether through tutors, extra help from a professor, or in skills lab, was an essential ingredient to their success.

Two areas of fairly consistent concern were in regard to money and career decision-making. Several participants recounted frustration with the overwhelming amount of information provided to them upon displacement. They had many questions about financial aid, how the TAA reimbursements were handled, the timing of payments, or exactly who paid for what. Although this information was often outside the purview of the community colleges, because it did cause the participants’ stress, these were conditions that negatively impacted them as students. Furthermore, although most community colleges are able to provide some career-decision making guidance, many of the participants remembered feeling frustration as far as which provider could help them make these critical decisions and the haste in which they often felt forced to make them.

***Research Question 2: How do displaced manufacturing workers describe those aspects of their experiences that they have identified as contributing to their success in retraining programs in a community college setting?***

Participants in this study were very clear that connections made a great deal of difference to them. These connections came in the form of support from other people. The connection with community campus personnel was essential. Several participants stated that without this support they believed that they would have failed. Support came from faculty members, various student services staff members, and assorted others on campus. One participant developed a relationship with a

campus network analyst who weekly checked in with the participant. Sometimes, this connection was as simple as the network analyst stopping to say, *“Hey, how’s it going?”* Another critical source of support came from other displaced manufacturing workers. All of the participants addressed the comfort of seeing others *“just like me.”*

The compassion and patience of faculty members made an impression on the participants in this study. Each participant shared a story about a faculty member’s expression of care and concern. These ranged from a faculty member just talking for over an hour with a displaced worker who had just started classes. Another was the extra help that someone received weekly. Yet, another was a faculty member agreeing to work with a student on a Saturday. The perception that faculty cared and wanted the participants to be successful made a “lasting impression” and really helped many of the participants strengthen their belief in themselves.

Finally, the development of a new coping strategy was identified as contributing to their success. In spite of confessed fear, trepidation, resistance or lack of confidence, each of the participants eventually decided to approach their retraining program as *“a job.”* Doing so seemed to enable them to adopt a *“can do”* attitude. As one person said, *“I can do this. When I worked I never said ‘I can’t do this or it’s too hard’. So, that’s what I need to do now, on my new job.”* Interestingly, the participants found that they talked about school in this way to other displaced workers, too. Checking in with each to see how *“the job”* (school) was going became something of joke among the displaced workers.

***Research Question 3: How do displaced manufacturing workers describe those aspects which they have identified as inhibiting their success in retraining programs in a community college setting?***

Again, individuals felt that the limited amount of time and help they received while trying to choose a training program increased their stress level. Furthermore, some felt that their uncertainty about the career choice they selected lowered their confidence level once they started classes.

As previously mentioned, while enrolled in school, participants indicated that they had several concerns about the financial end of the TAA benefits. Having someone available to readily answer questions might have, again, lowered their stress levels.

Several participants mentioned that, although they felt a great deal of support on the community campus they attended, they would have enjoyed having one person to report to. They envisioned this person as having their case file, knowing them fairly well, and following along with them to ensure that *“the i’s were dotted and the t’s crossed.”* Although the participants in this study all graduated, those that mentioned this type of support believed that it would have helped to lower stress thereby allowing them to focus more time and energy on their studies.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

Listening directly to the voices of those who have experienced the “event” to be studied gives the researcher an opportunity to learn from first-hand analysis. Their stories may have the power to point to new ways of offering services or responding to them. When asked what advice they would give to community

colleges or other displaced manufacturing workers, several suggestions for community college practices come to light not only through their direct observations but also through qualitative analysis:

1. Each of the participants cited at least one critical relationship with a college employee as instrumental to them. Whether that person was an advisor, counselor, faculty member, or the smiling face of the woman at the front desk who seemed to care about their success, the participants came to rely upon that relationship and the encouragement they received. Given their experiences, it might be prudent for community colleges serving displaced workers to further educate faculty and staff on the critical role that relationship building with students plays.
2. Each of the participants talked about how helpful it was to have others going through the same thing. Comments about the comfort they received knowing that they were not alone to the words of support and encouragement they heard from their fellow displaced workers were common. Although this support sometimes just happened naturally when participants were enrolled in the same classes or ran into each other on campus, it would be a proactive step for community colleges to provide a structure for this type of interaction. Some type of support group, whether formal or informal, might be helpful to displaced workers.
3. The selection of a program or new career appeared to be a point of frustration for several of the participants. Some of that frustration is beyond the purview of the community college and is dictated by the parameters as established by

the TAA, their source of retraining funding. At least for this group of displaced workers, a more in-depth, formatted workshop approach to choosing a program or career path might have been helpful. The one shot approach of “here, take this interest inventory and now pick,” seemed disconcerting to almost all of the participants. Several indicated that since it was a decision with such high stakes for them, a more thorough, thoughtful approach would have been appreciated.

4. The participants expressed varying degrees of frustration and fear in acclimating to their new role as “students”. Given the typical fear of many first-time students, the heightened trepidation of these mid-life, high-stakes displaced workers is understandable and to be expected. Special orientation sessions specifically addressing the unique challenges of this population, might go a long way toward easing their minds. Such orientations not only provide important information, but might allow potential critical relationships to develop with college employees and fellow displaced workers.
5. Academic support was essential to the success of the participants. All of the participants had used the academic support systems regardless of which college they attended. Each of them was very clear in their belief that without this support they would not have been successful. Again, given its high importance, encouraging displaced workers to connect with academic support systems early on would be time well spent. This might be accomplished through special welcome sessions designed just for displaced workers or

something as simple as a letter to them outlining services available and inviting them to drop by.

### **Implications for Future Research**

Given that few qualitative studies have focused specifically on displaced manufacturing workers and their experiences of retraining in a community college setting, several opportunities arise for further study. The participants in this study cited confusion and frustration with the initial TAA meetings. During these meetings, the benefits, rules, and procedures for retraining through TAA were explained. Service providers may want to investigate more effective and efficient ways of providing this information. The participants also talked about their trepidation upon choosing a career. There was agreement that the support given to help them chart a career path was inadequate. Further, there was on-going frustration with the stipulations surrounding the TAA. Going back to school after several years (sometimes decades) away often meant that they arrived at school with weak Math and Writing skills. To be denied access to the college preparatory classes that would strengthen those skills simply because those classes were not approved by the TAA funding, seemed counter-productive. In addition, restrictions around program eligibility sometimes resulted in participants enrolling in a training program not because it was their first choice, but because it fit within the approved funding timeframe. A more critical look at the TAA regulations, how subsequent services are delivered and how recipients perceive the services might yield interesting information.

The participants in this study were very clear that relationships with campus personnel were critical to their success. Further study to investigate how community college personnel view this study population may provide insight to inform practice.

All of the participants in this study were successful community college students. They had chosen a plan of action and successfully accomplished that plan. Displaced manufacturing workers who are not successful in their retraining efforts in a community college setting may have much different perceptions about their experiences. Further study of these perceptions may well yield information of interest.

Although not a consideration in this study, differences between male and female displaced workers may exist. Given the varied roles that men and women may hold within the home, community, and workplace, their perceptions about retraining may be quite different.

The psycho-social aspect of job displacement was not the primary pursuit of this research. However, it was clear from the participants that they had, during the process of displacement and retraining, dealt with many and quite varied emotions. The emotional fall-out from the experience was often strong and unnerving to them. Additional research to explore how dislocated workers deal the job loss and retraining process may help to strengthen counseling services available to them.

As stated in this study, many of the displaced manufacturing workers just “sort of found each other,” regardless of which community college they attended. All of the participants talked about the reassurance and support that they received from others “in the same boat.” Research that considers the development of cohort



models for displaced workers might contribute to higher success and/or satisfaction ratings for the participants.

### **Personal Reflections**

I was drawn to learn more about the experiences of displaced workers because of my job as the provost of a community college campus and as a community member. My campus is situated on the former site of a manufacturing company and its international headquarters. In fact, the building where I work was once a factory. As one might imagine, the loss of a large manufacturing company (and major employer in a smaller community), led to anxiety, anger, and fear. Since my campus was, literally, right next door, it wasn't long before displaced workers appeared before us. In addition, as a community member (and due to my position at the community college), I was a participant on several committees or initiatives developed to help the community recover from this closure.

The administrators and faculty at our community college quickly realized that our displaced workers seemed to be doing more than "just going back to college." They were in the midst of transforming their lives. Failure, as many of them said, was not an option.

As I learned more about these displaced workers who were now students, I became fascinated with their courage, industry, and sense of hopefulness. They had lost good-paying, long-standing, "secure" jobs that afforded a comfortable lifestyle. Further, they realized that the odds of working again in that industry or making the same wage were slim. I thought about myself and what I would do if faced with a

similar situation. It made me wonder if I would have their same gumption. It also made me want to do all that I could (and, in turn, all that our campus could) to serve them well.

Their stories were emotional, sad, sometimes humorous, and always inspiring to me. Listening to these individuals forced me to think beyond what we were currently doing as “best practice”, to how could we strive to do more, to immediately accommodate the needs of our new students. I conducted a search to learn more about best practices and displaced workers, but found that I needed more information, specifically on displaced manufacturing workers. Although many studies had been conducted over the years (especially regarding the cost benefit analysis and economic impact of retraining), fewer studies dealt with the service side of the community college. As massive layoffs continue, whether manufacturing or not, displaced workers will continue to find themselves in our community college classrooms. By learning about their “lived experiences”, I believe that the recommendations offered through this study will benefit other community colleges and, perhaps, other service providers who come in contact with displaced workers in other communities.

As a footnote to this study, the whereabouts of five of the six participants is known to me. One participant elected to continue an education in another college setting to earn a Bachelor degree. Three are gainfully employed, two in their area of retraining. One participant is just completing retraining. The final participant has since moved out of the area.

## APPENDIX. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

During the first round of interviews, I want the participants to tell me about their experiences as a manufacturing worker just losing a job. I also want to get an idea of their general experience in a retraining program.

1. Tell me about your work history – jobs you have held, when, where.
2. What did you like about those jobs?
3. What didn't you like about those jobs?
4. When you were thinking about careers or jobs you might like to do, what drew you to the manufacturing sector?
5. Describe your reaction to being displaced.
6. Describe your decision-making process for what to do next...
7. What expectations did you have once you lost your job?
8. What was the hardest part of losing your job?
9. As you thought about your next steps, what were the things that seemed most important?
10. As you think back to that first day of class, what do you remember?
11. What could have made the experience of coming back to school better for you?
12. What expectations did you have prior to beginning your retraining program?
13. What problems did you encounter?
14. What was the most rewarding part – and the most frustrating part of going back to school?
15. What support services did you use?
16. What support services would have been helpful?
17. What advice would you give to someone about to lose a job, go back to school?
18. What could community colleges do to serve you better?
19. Were there things you were expecting that you didn't find?
20. How did your first perceptions compare with your final perceptions about school?
21. How do you now view the loss of your manufacturing job?

During the second round of interviews, I want the participants to talk in more depth about how they made their decisions about retraining, how the decision to return to school changed them, describe the experiences they had in school that helped them to believe they might be successful and the impact of those experiences on their lives. I plan to take information from our first interview and ask them to explain in greater detail.

1. Describe your overall experience of returning to school.
2. Is there one single event or moment that convinced you that you would return to school for retraining?
3. Did your perception (or picture) of yourself change as you went from worker to student?
4. What have you found to be the benefits of going back to school?
5. Were there unexpected benefits or surprises to going back to school?
6. Was there an experience you had in school that helped you to believe that you would be a successful student?
7. Has going back to school changed how you view education?
8. Did going back to school change relationships within your family?
9. Would you encourage other displaced manufacturing workers to return to school? What advice would you give them?
10. What would you conclude about your life now after all you've been through?

The third interview will provide an opportunity for pulling together the meaning from the first two rounds. By this time, participants will have had the opportunity to read their transcripts and offer additional information, interpretation, or clarification.

1. What parts of your educational experience have had the greatest effect on you?
2. What parts were the least and most rewarding?
3. What were the biggest obstacles for you to overcome?
4. What is the best advice you could give someone returning to school?
5. What is the best advice you could give to community colleges?

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